No.17

# PARADISE AFIRE

## Volume 3: The Sri Lankan War, 1990-1994

ASIA@WAR SERIES

ADRIEN FONTANELLAZ

Helion & Company Limited
Unit 8 Amherst Business Centre
Budbrooke Road
Warwick
CV34 5WE
England
Tel. 01926 499 619
Email: info@helion.co.uk
Website: www.helion.co.uk
Twitter: @helionbooks
Visit our blog http://blog.helion.co.uk/

Text © Adrien Fontanellaz 2020
Photographs © as individually credited
Colour profiles © David Bocquelet, Luca Canossa, Tom Cooper, Anderson Subtil 2020
Maps and Diagrams © Tom Cooper 2020

Designed & typeset by Farr out Publications, Wokingham, Berkshire
Cover design by Farr out Publications, Wokingham, Berkshire
Printed by Henry Ling Limited, Dorchester, Dorset

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The author and publisher apologise for any errors or omissions in this work, and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

ISBN 978-1-914377-50-1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the express written consent of Helion & Company Limited.

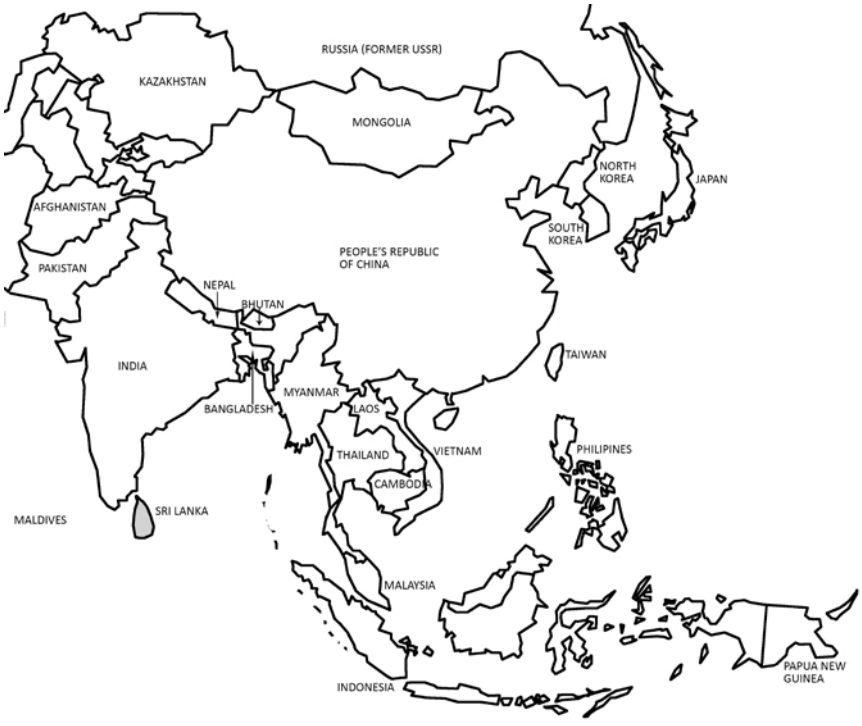
We always welcome receiving book proposals from prospective authors.

# CONTENTS

Abbreviations 2
Preface 2
Introduction 3

1 Struggling Lions 7
2 Rising Tigers 14
3 Under Siege 23
4 Air, Sea and Land 32
5 Bullet Cover is better than Steel Cover 39
6 Rise of the Sea Tigers 47
7 Leap Frog 56
8 Shadow Warfare 62

Bibliography 66
Notes 67
About the author 72




**Note**

In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of the events described. For reasons of simplicity, genuine designations for Soviet/Russian-made weapons used in this book are mentioned once, and then their ASCC (or NATO) codes are used instead.

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **AB** | Air Base |
| **AK** | Russian for *Automat Kalashnikova*; general designation for a class of Soviet – or former Eastern Bloc – manufactured class of 7.62mm calibre assault rifles |
| **AN** | Antonov (the design bureau led by Oleg Antonov) |
| **APC** | armoured personnel carrier |
| **ARV** | armoured recovery vehicle |
| **BAI** | battlefield interdiction |
| **CAS** | close air support |
| **CASEVAC** | casualty evacuation |
| **CO** | commanding officer |
| **COIN** | counterinsurgency |
| **EPRLF** | Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front |
| **EROS** | Eelam Revolutionary Organisation |
| **FAC** | fast attack craft |
| **FAO** | forward artillery observer |
| **FGB** | fast gun boat |
| **GPMG** | general purpose machine gun (mostly 7.62mm calibre) |
| **HMG** | heavy machine gun (12.7–14.5mm calibre) |
| **IFV** | infantry fighting vehicle |
| **IPC** | inshore patrol craft |
| **IPKF** | Indian Peace Keeping Force |
| **JVP** | Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) |
| **KIA** | killed in action |
| **Km** | kilometre |
| **LCM** | landing craft mechanised |
| **LKR** | Sri Lankan Rupee |
| **LTTE** | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam |
| **LZ** | landing zone |
| **MANPAD(S)** | man-portable air defence system(s) – light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier. |
| **MSF** | Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, NGO) |
| **MRAP** | mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle |
| **OBM** | outboard motor |
| **PFLT** | People's Front of Liberation Tigers; the LTTE's political party |
| **PLOTE** | People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam |
| **POW** | prisoner of war |
| **RAW** | Research and Analysis Wing (Indian intelligence agency) |
| **SLA** | Sri Lankan Army |
| **SLAF** | Sri Lankan Air Force |
| **SLN** | Sri Lankan Navy |
| **STF** | Special Task Force (Sri Lankan Police Force's COIN unit) |
| **TELO** | Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation |
| **TNA** | Tamil National Army |
| **UDT** | Underwater Demolition Team |
| **UNP** | United National Party |
| **VBIED** | vehicle-borne improvised explosive device |
| **WIA** | wounded in action |

# PREFACE

The third phase of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the so-called Eelam War II – which lasted from mid-1990 to the end of 1994 – ended in a stalemate, with neither side proving able to land a truly decisive blow on its enemies. Nevertheless, these four years proved decisive in several aspects. Noticeably, and despite all the flaws that plagued their efforts, the Sri Lankan armed forces went through a steep learning curve during this conflict. It is indeed during those years that they ended their transition from a 'parade army' or 'flying club' into a battle-hardened institution, able to combine their forces efficiently while undertaking ever larger and more sophisticated operations – all the while waging simultaneously two different kinds of war on a shoestring – both in terms of funding and manpower.

It is also during those years that the LTTE turned a part of its armed wing into a semi-conventional force, despite an endemic lack of resources. Indeed, the Tigers gradually developed new tactics and new weapons, which were to become their trademarks, thereby gaining the reputation of being one of the most innovative, professional and combat-effective insurgent forces ever and a forbear of the hybrid military organisations of the early 21st century. The LTTE managed this conversion largely through making itself independent from any foreign 'godfather' and fully exploiting the opportunities that offered themselves from the globalised world that was emerging out of the ashes of the Cold War.

That said, the LTTE was no 'perfect insurgency', and even less so a 'unique innovator'. Indeed, the Tigers closely followed developments in other parts of the world. The Sea Tigers, their infamous naval branch, was by no means the first-ever combat fleet raised by insurgents, and even the Black Tigers were inspired by the Hezbollah example in Lebanon. Nonetheless, the LTTE proved able to further develop these concepts while combining them in a new fashion. An aspect in which the movement excelled was communication warfare – where it completely outmatched its opponents. This meant that the Tigers were free to emphasise their successful operations at will – while not mentioning their failures, as far as this could be avoided.

Because of this latter point, providing a balanced narration of the conflict remains difficult to this day. There is a wealth of detail related to the security forces' experiences, from senior officers' autobiographies – like those of Major General Kamal Gunaratne or Major General Sarath Munasinghe – to the SLA and SLAF's institutional semi-official histories. Local historians or journalists, such as Channa Wickremesekera, L.M.H Mendis or C.A Chandraprema, also published very detailed works related to military operations. Furthermore, Shamindra Ferdinando published in the *Island* newspaper, as well as

his own blog, an extensive series of articles mainly based on interviews of veterans related to the war's military operations.

However, this is less true for the LTTE: most of the publications related to its military operations were carefully written to emphasise its battle-effectiveness, while on the other hand, former Sri-Lankan officers had no qualms about denouncing the flaws that plagued their services. Obviously, this results in distortion of perceptions vis-à-vis respective strengths and weaknesses of the two belligerents.

Therefore, the author would like to express his gratitude to the notable researcher and consultant Kagusthan Ariaratnam for the immense amount of help provided during the work on this volume, especially for sharing his own experiences as a former soldier, then officer of the LTTE Imran Pandian Unit, and then as an intelligence officer of the LTTE Military Intelligence Service. Between 1992 and 1995, Ariaratnam oversaw intelligence for the Sea Tigers and the Air Tigers, the LTTE's rudimentary naval and air wings, respectively, and was thus one of the rare individuals among the Tigers to have a balanced overview of the organisation's combat branches. The author would also like to thank Albert Grandolini for allowing the use of his large collection of pictures, as well as Tom Cooper, for all the help and insights provided. Last, but not least, the editorial team at Helion & Company Publishing who helped convert my manuscript into as readable a form as possible.

# INTRODUCTION

Once the last Indian troops had left Sri Lanka at the end of March 1990, and with the simultaneous defeat of the Tamil National Army, the LTTE found itself in almost total control of the Sri Lankan Tamil-populated areas in the north and the east of the country and lost no time in rebuilding its paramilitary state. A few months before, the political wing had established a formal political party, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT), under the leadership of Gopalaswamy Mahendraraja (alias Mahattaya), which created sections covering all the North-Eastern Province. Most importantly, the LTTE also corseted these areas with its own judicial system and systematised tax-collection to increase its revenues. Soon enough, a visa system was established for civilians moving in and out of the zones under the movement's control. Any Tamil political alternative was also suppressed, and militants from other movements hunted down mercilessly. Even the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS), until then the LTTE's closest ally, came under tremendous pressure. Soon enough, the Tigers forced the latter's deputies in the national parliament to resign, while the party had to dissolve itself, with its members given the choice between giving up any political activity or joining the LTTE.[1]

Of course, all of this was considerably eased by the ongoing ceasefire agreement with Colombo. Indeed, the Sri Lankan Army and police forces stationed in eastern and northern Sri Lanka had been instructed to remain in their camps and stations. Before long, these even had to request permission from the LTTE before moving out of their barracks. However, the alliance between President Premadasa's administration and the LTTE began to unravel almost as soon as they had reached their common objectives: the Indian withdrawal and the defeat of the Indian-backed Tamil armed groups.

Indeed, it soon turned out that the positions of the two allies were irreconcilable. As a prerequisite to their entry into the political mainstream, the LTTE wanted the government to discard the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution, which forbad any possibility of secession and requested any Sri Lankan citizen who was part of the country's institutions to swear an oath of allegiance to a united Sri Lanka. President Premadasa, either because he was unwilling or politically unable to do so, refused.[2] The root problem virtually since independence remained the same; any government according significant political concessions to the Tamil minority was almost certain to lose the next elections. In any case, the Premadasa administration remained equally evasive about another LTTE demand: the election of a new Northeastern Province Council that was crucial for the Tigers, as they were in a perfect position to triumph in the polls and would have gained considerable international legitimacy as a result.

Meanwhile, Colombo wanted the LTTE to disarm itself as a condition of its transformation into a conventional political party, and this was an absolute 'no-go' for the LTTE. In the meantime, their ultimate goal of an independent Tamil Eelam remained non-

Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, with one of his bodyguards. Both wear the famous 'tiger stripes' uniform of his movement, introduced in 1990. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

negotiable too, as the movement leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, made clear during a press conference held on 1 April 1990: "It is a misconception to assume that the ethnic issue would be resolved once the LTTE hands over its weapons. … We had not given up our demand for self-determination or independence."[3]

Colombo also reopened talks with the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), whose leadership was in exile in India, hoping that it would be able to challenge the LTTE–PFLT in any forthcoming elections in the Northeastern Province, and thus provide a counterweight to the latter. However, the LTTE reacted swiftly – and radically: on 19 June 1990, after months of preparations, a hit squad assassinated 14 EPRLF leaders during a meeting in Madras.[4]

A bicycle-mounted patrol of SLA troops shortly before Eelam War II erupted. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

## Victory disease

The situation worsened just two months after the IPKF withdrawal. In late May 1990, the LTTE denounced the movement of new security force contingents toward the Northeastern Province, as well as the death of one of its cadres. This individual, along with another militant, was arrested by Sri Lankan Army soldiers in the vicinity of the town of Batticaloa and forced to kneel on a tar road for hours until he swallowed his cyanide pill to end his predicament. On 7 June, the army reported the death of one of its troopers when militants fired upon a military vehicle travelling from Mullaitivu to Vavuniya. Furthermore, several army detachments reported that the Tigers were building bunkers and firing emplacements around their positions, in a repeat of what took place during the Thimpu talks in 1985. This was particularly worrying for the Sri Lankan officers because their camp perimeters lacked defence in depth compared to earlier, having been considerably reduced once the IPKF had arrived. Meanwhile, in the Batticaloa district, the Tigers also built at least 30 fortified checkpoints controlling access to the town of Batticaloa, each garrisoned by sections of militants of between 15 and 30 men.

Indeed, at that point, the LTTE leadership had grown confident enough of its ability to seize by force what was proving increasingly difficult to get by other means. Velupillai Prabhakaran had made clear to his closest associates that the links with the Premadasa government were only tactical in nature, being in essence like the Chinese Communist Party's association with the Chinese Nationalists during the Second World War. He also claimed that by defeating the IPKF, the LTTE had dealt successfully with an enemy much more powerful than the Sri Lankan armed forces would ever be. Besides, once the IPKF began to withdraw, the Tigers recruited and trained new fighters in their thousands and more than doubled their fighting strength in a matter of months. Meanwhile, the movement had refilled its arsenals thanks in part to its own international logistical network, but also due to Colombo's weapons deliveries the previous year and the large stocks captured from the TNA between October 1989 and March 1990. Accordingly, by early June at the latest, the movement's leadership instructed its local military commanders to prepare their units for one of the LTTE's trademark simultaneous assaults – but this time on an unheard-of scale. Strikingly, when asked 18 months later by Indian journalist Anita Pratap why the LTTE resumed the war in June 1990, Velupillai Prabhakaran replied: "We don't want Eelam on a platter. We will fight and win Eelam."[5]

While absolute certainty about the LTTE leadership's motives will always remain a mystery, what is certain is that the Sri Lankan security forces in northern and eastern Sri Lanka were utterly unprepared to face such an onslaught. There were a number of police stations, but most of these were small and isolated; hence, they were ripe for the taking, and there was virtually nothing the local army units could have done to reinforce them. Indeed, only skeleton army forces remained there since 1987, when the IPKF had repatriated the bulk of the forces fighting the Tamil insurgents in central and southern Sri Lanka, where they had been badly needed to face the JVP insurgency. Since early 1990, all army units in northern and eastern Sri Lanka were under the command of the 2nd Division, one of three then in existence along with the 1st and 3rd Divisions.

The three easternmost districts of Amparai, Batticaloa and Trincomalee each had only a single army battalion, and these were garrisoned in several camps. In the Batticaloa district, the 1st Gemunu Watch (1st GW, CO Lieutenant Colonel Hiran Halangode) was dispersed in five different camps, with the HQ and 120 men in Kallady, and Kiran and Kalavamchikudy having one understrength company of 50–60 men each, and Kalmunai and Vellaveli both having one slightly understrength platoon of 26 men including the CO. The situation was no better in the Amparai district, with the 6th Sri Lanka Light Infantry (6th SLLI, CO Captain Sarath Embowa) equally holding several widely separated positions.[6]

## Blitz in the east

The spark that triggered the LTTE onslaught came on 10 June 1990. That day, the police in Batticaloa arrested a Tamil Muslim – and notorious LTTE sympathiser – for having an affair with a married Sinhalese woman. Local militants reacted by abducing two police officers and surrounding the police station before assaulting and overrunning it at dawn the following day. Three hours later, a group of Tigers ambushed an SLA vehicle in Samanturai, in Amaprai district, killing 11 soldiers of the 6th SLLI. Meanwhile, detachments

Side view of a SLAF Bell 212, showing details of its FN ETNA HMP gun pod – a combined 7.62mm machine gun (top) and a pod for a 12.7mm M3P heavy machine gun with its ammunition. The combination was heavily utilised during the first year of Eelam War II. (SLAF)

of militants surrounded almost all the police stations and army camps in the two districts, as well as in Trincomalee district and throughout northern Sri Lanka.

The police officers in the stations were caught completely unprepared when the Tigers ordered them to surrender, largely because of their standing orders to avoid any confrontation with the LTTE. The police officers sought new instructions from their headquarters in Colombo, which ordered them to lay down their weapons and surrender. Indeed, at this stage, the government gambled that negotiations could be resumed and that it would be able to secure their release through peaceful means. As a result, the Tigers captured 899 police officers in the Northeastern Province, including around 600 in Amparai and Batticaloa districts, where they also took large amounts of small arms and ammunition.[7] The whole episode, however, soon turned into tragedy. While around 125 police officers managed to escape, hundreds of others were carried in buses to several locations before being executed, with their bodies then thrown into mass graves and burned.[8]

While the beleaguered SLA units received the same instructions as the police officers, their officers outright refused to follow such orders and opted to resist instead. It soon turned out that the LTTE assessed that overrunning the larger SLA camps was beyond its reach, so its regional commanders concentrated their efforts against the smallest of these positions.

In Vellaveli, a Sinhalese fishermen's village in the Amparai district, a small army camp occupied by a 1st GW platoon under 2nd Lieutenant R.M.C.C. Ranaweera found itself under attack by a large LTTE party. The platoon, supported by a pair of 81mm mortars firing from another nearby army camp and strafing passes from a SLAF Bell 212 gunship, managed to cover the evacuation of the 350 inhabitants aboard the SLNS *Sooraya* (CO Commander W.D. Ariyadasa) at dawn on 12 June. A few hours later, the platoon was evacuated by other SLN ships. Similarly, two platoons of the 6th SLLI under 2nd Lieutenant K.A.S.H. Karunthilleke in Kalmunai were targeted by intensive LTTE small-arms and mortar fire from 11 June. Although suffering two KIA, the detachment managed to keep the insurgents at bay, again thanks to the fire support provided by SLAF aircraft, as well as the fast attack craft (FAC) *P453* and *P457*. On 13 June, the two platoons were nonetheless evacuated aboard the SLNS *Kandula*.

Meanwhile, both the Kalawanchikudy camp – defended by 51 men from the 6th SLLI, soon reinforced by 10 policemen who had sought shelter in the camp instead of surrendering – and the Kiran Camp (two platoons of A Company, 1st GW, led by Captain Sumith Perera) were also on the receiving end of intensive LTTE fire. However, both garrisons held on for days until they were relieved. Hence, in both Batticaloa and Ampara districts, the LTTE blitz succeeded in eliminating regular police forces, but failed to inflict any major blow against army units, which, benefiting from intensive SLN and SLAF support, either held their positions or were successfully evacuated.[9]

Further north, from 11 June onwards, the LTTE had overrun police stations in Mankulam, Point Pedro, Murunkan, Vavuniya, Velvettiturai, Kankasanthurei and Jaffna, and launched a string of attacks against several SLA detachments, forcing the army to abandon the Thalaimannar and Kondachchi camps, in the Mannar district, whilst all the other local garrisons were placed under siege. Meanwhile, last-ditch attempts by the government to negotiate a ceasefire failed.[10]

## Operation Sledgehammer

Despite the suddenness of the LTTE onslaught, the Sri Lanka Army reacted quickly and managed to initiate its own multi-pronged offensive within a matter of days. On 14 June, the highly popular Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa was put in charge of the 3rd Division as well as all forces deployed in the east. The same day, the first army and police units began to move toward their targets.

In the Trincomalee district, 22nd Brigade (CO Brigadier Lucky Wijerathne, with three infantry battalions) managed to clear Trincomalee town between 14 and 15 June, and the main road axis and localities in the district within a matter of days. However, an amphibious rescue operation of the Muttur camp, besieged by the LTTE for several days, went awry. Early on the morning of 14 June, the SLN landed a commando detachment east of the camp, but a contingent of Tigers were positioned near the landing point and ambushed the commandos once they came ashore, killing 40 of them, with just six survivors escaping aboard a dinghy. This was only the beginning of their ordeal, as they drifted in the Indian Ocean for several weeks and lost two more of their number before they reached the coast of Thailand. Back in Sri Lanka, a second detachment, with two companies of the 5th Gemunu Watch, landed unopposed near Muttur in a different location and reached the camp, relieving the garrison.

Meanwhile, in the Ampara district, a group of Special Task Force platoons under Senior Superintendent of Police Lionel Karunasena, supported by Buffel MRAP (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected)

vehicles, began a multi-pronged advance from Lahugala toward Pottuvill. In Batticaloa district, 1st Brigade Group (CO Brigadier A.K. Jayawardhana, with the 1st Sinha and 1st Regiment Special Forces) advanced from Bakkiella toward Vellaveli and finally broke the siege of the Kalawanchikkudy camp on 18 June, while 3rd Brigade Group (CO Brigadier A.M.U. Senevirathne, with two infantry battalions) moved from Welikanda and relieved the Kiran camp. The two brigades and the STF thereafter successfully retook control of the main population centres. Things were no different in the west and the centre of the country, where 5th Brigade Group (CO Brigadier Upali Karunarathne, leading three infantry battalions) swept through the Puttalam–Silvathurai road in the Mannar district, and 4th Brigade Group (CO Brigadier Sathis Jayasundera, with two infantry battalions) retook control of the town of Vavuniya after six hours of intense fighting.

With a few exceptions, none of these advances were opposed in force by the Tigers, who merely contented themselves with delaying tactics while avoiding becoming engaged in protracted fighting. In the eastern districts, the Tigers merely vacated the main localities and withdrew toward their networks of camps, well hidden in jungle areas, inland or around the coast.[11] Crucially, once it became widely known, the mass-executions of police officers virtually guaranteed that the new war would be merciless, as the then Sri Lankan Minister of State for Defence, Ranjan Wijeratne, made crystal clear: "No half-way house with me. Now I'm going all out for the LTTE. We will show no mercy. We annihilate terrorists."[12]

## A vicious conflict

Unsurprisingly, the bloodletting continued unabated, with both sides committing repeated atrocities. Ruthlessness remained a LTTE trademark. Indeed, the systematic execution of prisoners remained a standard practice, the main reason being that guarding and feeding prisoners of war was too costly for its limited resources.[13] Allegations of captured soldiers suffering torture before being executed were numerous. This policy proved short-sighted in the extreme, even on a military level, it ensured that surrounded army troops would fight to the last instead of surrendering to the insurgents.

This was not the only example of counter-productive violence from the LTTE. By 1990, the movement had grown suspicious about the Tamil Muslim community, as a number of Muslims in the east and north had proved sympathetic to the Indian intervention, as well as the EPRLF. This became even worse once several prominent Tamil Muslim politicians expressed openly their wish for local autonomy for their community. In early August 1990, LTTE guerrillas attacked two mosques in the Batticaloa district and slaughtered 103 Muslims. In October 1990, after a series of SLAF airstrikes against hidden LTTE facilities in the Jaffna Peninsula, the movement's counter-intelligence assessed that these had been the result of tip-offs from Tamil Muslims.[14] Consequently, all Muslims living in the districts of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar – roughly 40,000 people – were expelled with 24 hours' notice, and their belongings seized by the movement. Muslim LTTE militants were also expelled from the movement. In essence, within a few months, the Tigers thus made themselves an enemy of a community representing roughly a third of the population in the eastern districts.[15]

The Tigers also continued to launch periodic attacks against Sinhalese settlements located in what it claimed as the Tamil homeland, killing dozens of villagers. The Sinhalese villages in the Weli Oya area continued to be regularly targeted, despite the presence of numerous army units; this area was of crucial importance for the LTTE, as its militants transiting from north to east had to cross it. From the LTTE's perspective, these attacks against civilians also had the benefit of tying down a large number of security forces in static guard duties, thereby making them unavailable for offensive operations.[16]

## Militias

The government continued its home guard programme, consisting of arming local Muslim and Sinhalese villagers in areas adjacent to the LTTE-held territories to provide them with a self-defence capability. By mid-1991, there were around 23,000 home guards, including 2,000 Muslims. Unsurprisingly, these occasionally took part in retaliatory killings against Tamil civilians too. One such instance took place on 29 April 1992, when a platoon of LTTE fighters, supported by local Tamils (part of the movement's auxiliary forces), raided the village of Alanchipothana in the Polonnaruwa district. The Tigers first attacked the local police station, putting the police officers to flight, and then turned against the villagers, killing 54 people – including 46 women and children – and injuring many others. Retaliation came just a few hours after the attack, when Muslim home guards raided the neighbouring Tamil villages of Muthugal and Karapola, killing 51 people.

The war in Sri Lanka was anything other than a 'clean' affair: on the contrary, massacres of the civilian population were a regular occurrence, and were committed by both sides. This photograph shows victims of an LTTE attack on the village of Kalwara in 1995. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

The Sri Lankan security forces also supported Tamil

groups that opposed the LTTE, both with money and weapons. These groups played a crucial role because they had the ability to blend in among, and had an intimate knowledge of, the Tamil society – which was almost impossible for the regular forces to acquire on their own. Hence, they were a crucial asset in intelligence-gathering, with the militants often operating as spotters. These groups were also suspected of committing atrocities – with the full knowledge of the security forces, who shielded them from accusations of human rights violations. Indeed, these militants were engaged in their own implacable struggle against the LTTE and knew that they could expect even less mercy from the Tigers than regular army soldiers. These Tamil fighters were, however, few in number. By early 1991, there were apparently 112 TELO militants active in the Batticaloa district, and 146 PLOTE armed fighters present in Vavuniya. A similar number of fighters from another – more recently formed – organisation, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), were operating on Kayts Island in the Jaffna Peninsula. Relations with local SLA units on Kayts Island were often plagued with difficulties, noticeably because the latter had to provide rations to the militants, all the while suspecting them of lying about their real strength to sell their surplus on the black market. On some occasions, severe incidents developed between these Tamil militants and SLA soldiers.[17]

Both the air force and army were committing atrocities too. The use of extremely imprecise barrel bombs over urban areas such as Jaffna repeatedly caused heavy civilian casualties. Church officials reported that St James' Church in Jaffna was deliberately targeted by two F-7 fighter aircraft on 13 November 1993, with 10 civilians killed as a result. The practice of considering any vehicle moving in an insurgent-held area as hostile was resumed, as highlighted by an incident on 3 May 1991 when a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) car was strafed by a helicopter, wounding four of its passengers.

While the armed forces' standard procedure before launching an operation was to forewarn civilians and instruct them to gather in temples to avoid casualties, there were also occurrences of random artillery and air force bombardment targeting specific localities suspected of harbouring militants. There were also cases of junior officers letting their men loot houses emptied by their occupants. Retaliatory killing could also take place: on 11 June 1991, in the Batticaloa district, a patrol from the 5th GW lost two of their number killed in action when a landmine blew up their tractor, and the surviving soldiers went on the rampage in a neighbouring Tamil village, executing several dozen inhabitants. The massacre caused an outcry and 19 soldiers were subsequently arrested.[18]

There was, however, even worse to come, as a direct consequence of the second JVP insurrection that had engulfed southern Sri Lanka in a wave of unprecedented violence between 1987 and 1990. A vicious crackdown followed in the wake of Operation Sledgehammer in the three eastern districts from the end of June 1990 onwards. Thousands of local Tamils were arrested and detained – large numbers of whom were never seen again, simply disappearing. In the meantime, the infamous death squads – such as the 'Black Cobras' – also reappeared. Circulating in unmarked vehicles, they became notorious for raiding houses in the middle of the night and capturing those they suspected to be LTTE sympathisers before executing them – sometimes by burning them alive or decapitating them – and discarding their bodies. As a result, it is alleged that some 3,000 people disappeared between June and December 1990 alone. The wave of terror then slowed down, but these practices still continued if on a lesser scale. Even in Colombo, countless Tamils were arrested and detained for days without any charges.[19]

# 1
# STRUGGLING LIONS

As the war resumed, the Sri Lankan Army's strength was more or less the same as it was when combat operations had ceased once the IPKF had taken over: in 1989, it had 45,373 officers and other ranks, including 12,616 from the volunteer force. The institution remained a light infantry force in nature, centred on 25 infantry battalions.[1] Infantry battalion organisation remained tailor-made for counter-insurgency work. They had four rifles companies with four platoons each, which in turn had 31 men – an officer controlling three 10-strong sections. The battalions also had one administrative company and a headquarter company, meaning there were around 33 officers and 650 men in total. Five of these battalions were, however, part of two new regiments: the Vijayabahu Regiment, which had been resurrected, and the Sri Lanka National Guard Regiment, which was composed of part-time volunteers, engaged only in rear-area security duties. The slightly older Sri Lanka Rifle Corps was another purely volunteer force used to guard infrastructure. To support its infantry, the SLA could rely on the small Sri Lanka Armoured Corps (SLAC) with two regiments, as well as three artillery regiments. There was also a commando regiment, while the former Combat Tracker Team had been converted into a Rapid Deployment Force and, finally, the Regiment of Special Forces. There were also numerous specialised support forces, including an array of signals, field engineer, medical or military police units. These forces were attached to three divisions, which acted as territorial commands. In turn, these controlled a small number of brigades, or specific area commands, such as the Vanni Headquarters, based in Vavuniya.[2]

With the escalation of the war, the army had no choice but to expand massively, which resulted in several waves of units being created between 1990 and 1994. A first wave of raising infantry units came in May and June 1990, when no less than four new battalions came into being, followed by two others before the year's end. The next major wave took place between September 1992 and January 1993, when eight new battalions were inaugurated, and the third main wave came from November 1993 to January 1994, with the raising of six battalions. With a few further infantry battalions created between these three waves, the SLA could muster no less than 47 infantry battalions by the end of 1994. In the meantime, the Sri Lanka National Guard Regiment also expanded massively, from a single battalion in 1989 to six by the end of 1994, and these could relieve standard infantry formations by taking over rear-area security duties. A second commando regiment was raised in March 1993, followed by a second Special Forces regiment on 25 July 1994. The other branches, such as the engineers, benefited from a similar expansion. The artillery was reinforced with the activation of the 8th Artillery Regiment in January

Early during the Eelam War II, lightly armed SLA troops could still afford to patrol northern Sri Lanka in unprotected civilian vehicles. However, the situation was soon to undergo a dramatic change. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

1994. In 1991, 12 Type 59-I 130mm long-range guns of Chinese origin were added to the inventory of 25-pounders, Type 56 85mm guns, M48 76mm mountain guns and 120 mortars inherited from earlier times. Guns and heavy mortars were deployed in six-gun batteries or in three-piece troops, while multi-battery concentrations were extremely rare. After Operation Liberation in 1987, the Sri Lankan artillerymen were well versed in the use of grid-pattern coordinates – shared with the SLAF – and coordination with Forward Artillery Observers (FAO).[3]

## The Czech arms deal

Acquiring weapon systems of Western origin remained extremely difficult for Sri Lanka, because these were comparatively expensive and Western governments remained reluctant to sell them. Ironically, the army had planned to acquire new armoured vehicles in the late 1980s and obtained the funds to do so but was unable to find suitable examples. Aside from the difficulty in finding appropriate and affordable tanks, acquiring weapon systems also proved politically sensitive – to the point that, once inducted, the army MBTs were prohibited from moving south of Anuradhapura, while influential army officers proved fiercely opposed to them out of sheer conservatism. Hence, the Armoured Corps had to content itself with a new batch of second-hand Saladin and Saracen armoured vehicles, which allowed it to equip the 3rd Reconnaissance Regiment, raised in 1988.[4] Although a last batch of six Saladins was delivered on 25 January 1993, the first few months of the war had already made clear that these armoured cars were inadequate for the task. Firstly, they were wheeled and mostly road-bound – which was a cause for endless problems in operations in sandy terrain or paddy fields – and secondly, their 76mm low-velocity gun was unable to penetrate the strongest enemy bunkers. There was no way around the fact that the army needed much more powerfully armed tracked armoured vehicles.[5]

Hence, by early 1991, the army decided to acquire tanks, and the most obvious candidate became the Soviet-designed T-55. These could be obtained very cheaply because the international arms market was flooded with such vehicles once the former Warsaw Pact armies began withdrawing theirs from service by the thousands. For the same reason, spares could be obtained cheaply and from a wide array of sources. Although the T-55 was already an obsolete design, it was assessed as adequate for Sri Lankan needs: notorious for being rustic and thus easy to maintain, they were intended to operate in small formations and dedicated to infantry-support tasks, in very similar fashion to Second World War assault guns.

Czechoslovakia was soon selected to provide a batch of 25 T-55s and two VT-55A armoured recovery vehicles (ARVs).[6] An eight-man delegation led by Brigadier T. Paranagma, the CO of the Armoured Corps, arrived in Prague in August 1991. The technical team was subsequently taken to Zvolen, where decommissioned Czechoslovak tanks were stocked in their hundreds. However, the Sri Lankan officers soon realised that the Czechs had deliberately selected a batch of heavily used T-55s. Indeed, they discovered that their Czech counterparts – who were expecting a massive Iranian order – considered the Sri Lankan order to be only 'marginal'. However, the Sri Lankans engaged in an exercise of 'whisky diplomacy' and thus managed to convince the local officials to select other vehicles in much better condition. Aside of these 27 armoured vehicles, the deal also included a large consignment of spares and ammunition, as well as the dispatch of a training mission to Sri Lanka.

The tanks were first sent to the Polish harbour of Gdansk, where they were loaded aboard the Norwegian merchant ship *Pauwgracht*, which arrived in Trincomalee on 11 October 1991. The T-55s were disembarked the following day, before being moved to the nearby Clappenbourg army camp. The secrecy surrounding the whole deal was such that several civilians who saw the tanks moving on the road at night panicked, fearing a new Indian intervention. Meanwhile, a new unit, the 4th Armoured Regiment, had been raised on 24 September 1991, with personnel dispatched from two other Armoured Corps regiments, and placed under Lieutenant Colonel Sri Mudannayake.

The Czech training team, comprising five instructors and a translator, arrived soon after, and the regiment began its conversion to the T-55 – but this proved a lengthy process, if only because the crews had to follow dedicated physical training to cope with the notoriously un-ergonomic tank, which required a lot of physical effort from its crew to be operated. Once the basic training on the new mount was completed, a second Czech team of 15 specialists arrived in January 1992 to provide the unit with a three-month tactical training course. In the meantime, one officer and 40 NCOs and soldiers were sent to Pakistan to be trained for a month at the Naushera School of Armour. The new unit was then organised into three squadrons, with three two-tank troops and a two-tank HQ troop each, while a single T-55 was kept as the regimental command vehicle. In operations, a squadron had a VT-55A ARV attached too, but the tanks were also deployed in troop-sized detachments of two vehicles. It turned out that the army high command was extremely impatient to deploy their new weapon

One of the Type-86 IFVs acquired by the SLA in 1992, soon after its delivery, together with a squad of troops from the 3rd SLAC, the only unit to operate this type. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

in operational areas, and a single troop was shipped from Trincomalee to Jaffna in December 1991 – with only partially trained crew and despite the protests of Lieutenant Colonel Sri Mudannayake.[7]

The army also felt the need to acquire tracked APCs to reinforce its Saracen units. A batch of 24 T-85 APCs ordered from China arrived in September 1991. One of these was in a command vehicle configuration, and five others in ARV configuration. The 18 remaining examples were in infantry combat vehicle configuration, with a turret carrying a 73mm gun. The Sri Lankans thus considered these as light tanks. In January 1992, a batch of 12 Type-86 wheeled APCs arrived in Sri Lanka. Both T-85s and T-86s were used to re-equip the 3rd Reconnaissance Regiment, with the former forming two squadrons and the latter a third one. All the Armoured Corps' remaining Saracens and Saladins were now concentrated in the 1st Reconnaissance Regiment. However, the Type-85 proved to be a mixed blessing to the Sri Lankan Army. Aside from its very thin armour and inefficient periscopes, the Chinese design proved also difficult to maintain because of an endemic lack of spares – but also because all the manuals were provided only in Chinese. Finally, another unit, the 5th Armoured Regiment, was raised in January 1994, and subsequently equipped with a mix of 16 BMP-1s, BMP-2s and their ARV variants, provided by Ukraine and delivered aboard An-124 flights in August 1994.[8]

## Training crisis

The army had thus doubled its overall size from 2,285 officers and 43,088 other ranks in 1989 (including 12,616 volunteers), to 4,074 officers and 86,498 other ranks (including 30,509 volunteers) in 1994. Accordingly, the SLA command structure was changed; by the end of 1994, three divisions (numbered from 1–3) controlled 13 brigades, as well as four Task Forces (numbered from 1–4).

This build-up came at a price: most manoeuvre units were almost constantly engaged in combat operations, and it became extremely difficult to provide these with refresher courses or additional training. This was made worse by the fact that a number of units had partly 'unlearned' crucial lessons gained before 1987 while fighting against the Tamil insurgent groups, because the war waged against the JVP insurgents between 1987 and 1990 proved much less demanding in terms of tactical knowledge. Furthermore, the 1987–90 conflict followed a purely terror and counter-terror dynamic that had adverse effects on the unit professionalism, as acknowledged rather euphemistically by a SLA officer: "Unconventional deployment and methods of operation in the southern areas certainly had affected the discipline of troops."[9]

The massive influx of new recruits heavily taxed the army training system, while the basic training regimen was found inadequate by no less than Lieutenant General G.H. de Silva, head of the SLA from January 1994 onward: "Recruit training in content and duration needed change. Producing soldiers like sausages from a machine in 4 weeks of recruit training had to be stopped as it was unfair by the soldiers who went straight to the front and by the junior leader to fit him into a combat team."[10]

The army itself assessed time and again that a number of infantry units were suffering from a lack of proficiency in setting field fortifications, which were often ill-designed and included flaws such as emplacing fire-support weapons too close to the forward line or inadequate minefield patterns. Many defences were also lacking in depth. This was also true for small-formation tactics and combined operations with armour, where the infantry tended to remain close to

**Table 1: SLA's main infantry units, late 1994**

| Unit name | Activation date | Abbreviation |
|---|---|---|
| Sri Lanka Light Infantry Regiment | | SLLI |
| 1st Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 1950 | 1st SLLI |
| 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 1950 | 2nd (V) SLLI |
| 3rd Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 16 Dec 1985 | 3rd SLLI |
| 4th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 5 May 1987 | 4th SLLI |
| 5th Volunteer Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 15 Aug 1987 | 5th (V) SLLI |
| 6th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 8 Jun 1990 | 6th SLLI |
| 7th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 20 Nov 1992 | 7th SLLI |
| 8th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 16 Jan 1993 | 8th SLLI |
| 9th (Volunteer) Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 1 Nov 1993 | 9th (V) SLLI |
| 10th Battalion Sri Lanka Light Infantry | 23 Jan 1994 | 10th SLLI |

| Table 1: SLA's main infantry units, late 1994 (continued) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Regiment** | **Battalion** | **Activation date** | **Abbreviation** |
| **Sri Lanka Sinha** | 1st Battalion SLSR | 1956 | 1st SLSR |
| | 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion SLSR | 1956 | 2nd (V) SLSR |
| | 3rd (Volunteer) Battalion SLSR | 1969 | 3rd (V) SLSR |
| | 4th Battalion SLSR | 1 Dec 1985 | 4th SLSR |
| | 6th Battalion SLSR | 10 Aug 1987 | 6th SLSR |
| | 7th Battalion SLSR | 12 May 1990 | 7th SLSR |
| | 8th Battalion SLSR | 16 Oct 1992 | 8th SLSR |
| | 9th Battalion SLSR | 19 Jan 1993 | 9th SLSR |
| | 10th Battalion SLSR | 23 Jan 1994 | 10th SLSR |
| | 11th (Volunteer) Battalion SLSR | 16 Apr 1994 | 11th (V) SLSR |
| **Gemunu Watch** | 1st Battalion GW | 1962 | 1st GW |
| | 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion GW | 1964 | 2nd (V) GW |
| | 3rd (Volunteer) Battalion GW | 1965 | 3rd (V) GW |
| | 4th Battalion GW | 27 Dec 1985 | 4th GW |
| | 5th Battalion GW | 1 Jun 1987 | 5th GW |
| | 6th Battalion GW | 22 May 1990 | 5th GW |
| | 7th Battalion GW | 12 Oct 1992 | 7th GW |
| | 8th Battalion GW | 28 Jan 1993 | 8th GW |
| | 9th Battalion GW | 24 Jan 1994 | 9th GW |
| | 10th (Volunteer) Battalion GW | 1 Jun 1994 | 10th (V) GW |
| **Vijayabahu Infantry** | 1st Battalion VIR | 15 Nov 1988 | 1st VIR |
| | 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion VIR | ?? Nov 1988 | 2nd (V) VIR |
| | 3rd (Volunteer) Battalion VIR | 9 Mar 1988 | 3rd (V) VIR |
| | 4th Battalion VIR | ?? Aug 1989 | 4th VIR |
| | 5th Battalion VIR | ?? Mar 1990 | 5th VIR |
| | 6th Battalion VIR | 17 Aug 1990 | 6th VIR |
| | 7th Battalion VIR | 3 Nov 1992 | 7th VIR |
| | 8th Battalion VIR | 3 Dec 1993 | 8th VIR |
| | 10th (Volunteer) Battalion VIR | 1 Jun 1994 | 10th (V) VIR |
| **Gajaba Regiment** | 1st Battalion GR | 14 Oct 1983 | 1st GR |
| | 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion GR | 14 Oct 1983 | 2nd (V) GR |
| | 3rd Battalion GR | 31 Dec 1985 | 3rd GR |
| | 4th Battalion GR | 15 Aug 1987 | 4th GR |
| | 5th (Volunteer) Battalion GR | ?? Jul 1989 | 5th (V) GR |
| | 6th Battalion GR | 17 May 1990 | 6th GR |
| | 7th (Volunteer) Battalion GR | 1 Nov 1991 | 7th (V) GR |
| | 8th Battalion GR | 17 Sep 1992 | 8th GR |
| | 9th Battalion GR | 8 Mar 1993 | 9th GR |
| | 10th Battalion GR | 7 Jan 1994 | 10th GR |
| | 11th (Volunteer) Battalion GR | 21 Apr 1994 | 11th (V) GR |
| **Sri Lanka National Guard** | 1st–16th (Volunteer) Battalions SLNG | Nov 1989–Nov 1992 | 1st–16th SLNGR |

the armoured vehicles, thus failing to protect these efficiently against RPG attacks, as well as for night operations. Indeed, the infantry not only seldom operated at night, but also tended to suffer from 'security in numbers' syndrome and patrolled only in comparatively large formations, meaning they were much easier for the insurgents to either avoid or ambush. A number of units also remained in their camps, failing to dominate their surroundings with constant patrolling or ambush-laying.[11] Furthermore, in 'quiet' areas, units often repeated patterns during their patrols, with sometimes tragic consequences, as related by then Major Kamal Gunaratne while describing an insurgent ambush that wiped out two platoons in Kakupadayan in the Mannar district in 1991:

> Daily patrols to Kokkupadayan had been a routine and the soldiers had been in the habit of resting under a very big tree in the area. The routine had been observed by the terrorists, who had covered the area under the tree with claymore mines. The soldiers had gone out that day on the patrol and stopped as usual under the tree to rest and the terrorists had activated the mines and attacked them from all directions, killing everyone in the patrol. … 2 officers and 46 soldiers were killed.[12]

The training problem was further aggravated by the fact that the relatively low wages allocated to the rank and file guaranteed that the bulk of these soldiers came from the poorest strata of Sri Lankan society, and new recruits were thus mostly from a peasant background. While these were more accustomed to endure hardship than the youth from the cities, they also tended to have benefited from only minimal schooling.

| Table 2: Sri Lanka Armoured Corps units raised 1988-1994 | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Regiment** | **Activation Date** | **Abbreviation** |
| 3rd Reconnaissance Regiment | 16 Nov 1988 | III SLAC |
| 4th Armoured Regiment | 24 Sep 1991 | IV SLAC |
| 5th Reconnaissance Regiment | 6 Jan 1994 | V SLAC |

## Shortages

The SLA found itself mired in a structural manpower shortage. When the war began, it was widely expected that the armed forces would deal with the LTTE in short order, and the army recruitment campaigns were highly successful, with young men literally queuing in front of the recruitment offices to enlist. Indeed, as many as 25,000 of them volunteered to join the army during the war's first six months. However, by 1991, following the army's first defeats, it was already obvious that the war was becoming a protracted one, and it became increasingly difficult to recruit new soldiers. In the meantime, the army suffered from constant attrition, with 3,531 KIA between 1990 and 1994, as well as a much higher number of wounded, while desertions were also on the rise.[13]

The SLA's growth was largely made possible by a commensurate increase of funds. The army's budget raised from US$59,977,600 in 1989 to US$173,013,785 in 1994, but this was still not enough to meet all its needs. Noticeably, stocks of mortar ammunition were often depleted, while items such as flak jackets were not widely available for the troops. This was also the case with radio equipment, which caused obvious tactical disadvantages. To take one example, 81mm mortar crews allegedly found themselves frustrated on several occasions because the radio of their FAO had a range inferior to their tubes' maximum range.[14]

Funding allocation was not, however, the only cause of the SLA's problems, as corruption time and again resulted in massive wastage. For instance, a major scandal – which eventually caused a Criminal Investigation Department investigation – erupted in 1993: officials had bought millions of meals-ready-to-eat (MRE) rations from a supplier which had already been disqualified by the Army Technical Evaluation Committee. The main result of this waste was that front-line soldiers were issued with rotten MRE while engaged in combat operations.[15] Even Lieutenant General Cecil Waidyaratne, the SLA CO between 1991 and 1993, found himself confronted with almost Byzantine obstruction once he decided to automatize payment of soldiers' wages, as he admitted in a report he issued following the end of his mandate:

> I made every attempt to computerise the pay of personnel during the last year but the business mafia frustrated the steady progress of this particular computerisation programme and again it is being delayed. I hope that the new commander with equal enthusiasm [will] continue with this project so that the salaries of personnel [can] be sent through the banking system to their dependents.[16]

## Strategic dilemma

By June 1990, the Sri Lankan Army had a roughly ten-to-one advantage over the LTTE, while the security forces also included the Special Task Force, the police's dreaded Special Commandos, but this apparent dominance was deceptive. The bulk of the troops were tied down in protecting multiple locations and on two different fronts, where the war followed very different dynamics. In the east, the security forces were engaged in a vicious and manpower-consuming counter-insurgency campaign, while in the north, the conflict followed a semi-conventional pattern. To make matters worse, the Tigers were not, with a few exceptions, tied down by the necessity to defend specific areas, and were thus free to concentrate their fighters and gain local superiority when and where they wanted to.

Furthermore, the army expansion did not markedly change the situation, because the LTTE also increased its number of fighters, so the force ratio between the two belligerents thus remained the same. This meant the army did not by any means have the manpower to both defend all the areas it needed to defend while pressuring the LTTE on several fronts simultaneously. Indeed, even launching two major operations at the same time proved out of its grasp. In turn, this led to innumerable offensives meeting with various outcomes, but ending with the troops vacating the areas they had just captured. Widely recognised as an excellent strategist, Lieutenant General Cecil Waidyaratne soon assessed this "hold onto everything and fight everywhere" security forces default strategy as hopeless. Instead, he advocated the adoption of a passive stance on the northern front and the reallocation of units to take on the insurgents in the eastern theatre. Indeed, he assessed the eastern front as crucial for the LTTE's overall strength because it was a major recruitment ground, and also an important source of revenue as the economy there remained in a better shape as it was not isolated from the outside world as the north was. Once the east was secured, the full might of the army would have fallen on the north. However, as this would have meant temporarily giving away territory to the insurgents, Waidyaratne was never given a free hand to implement this strategy.[17]

However, and despite all these shortcomings, the SLA was not lacking in redeeming features. It proved able, albeit slowly, to acknowledge its failures and address them. It also sometimes emulated the LTTE's tactics – or the other way around, as both adversaries sometimes copied the ideas of the other. Ironically, both the SLA and the LTTE strongly believed that 'bullet cover is better than steel cover' – in other words, that offence is the best form of defence – and both were adept at strategic diversion, routinely initiating diversionary attacks far away from their intended *Schwerpunkt* to keep the enemy guessing about the main target.[18]

Furthermore, the army had many talented and well-trained officers, while on innumerable occasions, the soldiers fought with grim determination against all odds. During the whole war, there were seldom any completely one-sided affairs, and the insurgents, even if emerging as the victors in specific battles, almost always had to pay a heavy price for it.

## The Sri Lankan Air Force

The role played by the SLAF during the conflict cannot be overemphasised. It often proved instrumental in allowing isolated garrisons to survive by continuing to provide supplies and was the only means to swiftly shift troops from one location to another. Furthermore, with the Sri Lankan Army being relatively poorly equipped in support weapons, the service was also instrumental in bringing firepower to bear at short notice anywhere on the island. The overall flight time of the service – roughly between 17,000 and 18,000 hours per year between 1990 and 1994 – gives an insight into the importance played by airpower. Indeed, the bulk of these hours were dedicated to operational flying. In 1994, out of 17,700.31 flight hours, 14,719.45 were for operational flying, 2,498.11 for training and 482.35 for commercial activities. Aside from its strike missions, the SLAF carried a staggering 261,480 passengers that year and almost 6,043 tons of cargo.

| Table 3: SLAF flight hours per annum | |
|---|---|
| **Year** | **Number of hours flown** |
| 1988 | 12,914.40 |
| 1989 | 15,118.35 |
| 1990 | 17,355.55 |
| 1991 | 18,998.15 |
| 1992 | 16,798.17 |
| 1993 | 17,082.08 |
| 1994 | 17,700.31 |

However, the SLAF did not grow in the same proportions as the SLA: by the end of 1989, the air force had a strength of 10,284 men, including 490 officers and 142 cadets, while five years later, it had only increased to 11,680 men, with 591 officers and 84 cadets.[19] By then, a Training Wing, a Transport Wing and a Helicopter Wing, as well as a Maritime squadron – as detailed in Table 4 – operated its fleet of aircraft. Once the war resumed, the SLAF also organised four zonal commands to partly decentralise its operations and ease coordination with the other services on a local level.

By 1991, the air force had an inventory of 73 aircraft, and this number remained roughly similar until the end of Eelam War II, mainly because it operated on a tight budget and the required equipment – largely aircraft – were comparatively expensive. Accordingly, the SLAF went to great lengths to become as self-sufficient as possible to save precious resources.

The SLAF Aeronautical Engineering Wing was able to overhaul or repair battle-damaged aircraft in-country, while the General Engineering Wing continued to produce barrel bombs and the SIG series of bombs, but this was not enough to alleviate the lack of funds. Furthermore, a number of countries were reluctant to sell combat aircraft to Sri Lanka, further limiting the procurement options available to its airmen. Consequently, the SLAF often had no choice but to make do with second-hand aircraft acquisitions, or aircraft that were anything but adapted to its needs. Adding to the problem, a significant part of the existing inventory was nearing the end of its service life and in need of replacement, such as the Cessna 337 that had to be withdrawn from service in 1993. The service also began to suffer significant combat losses.[20]

| Table 4: Order of Battle, SLAF, 1990[21] | |
|---|---|
| **Unit (abbreviation)** | **Number and type of aircraft** |
| No. 1 Flying Training Wing (FTW) | 6 Cessna 150, 7 SF.260W |
| No. 2 Transport Wing | 2 Y-8, 6 Y-12, 3 HS.748, 1 King Air B200T, 1 Cessna 412 |
| No. 3 Maritime Squadron | 4 Cessna 337 |
| No. 4 Helicopter Wing | 7 Jet Ranger, 12 Bell 212, 4 Bell 412 |
| **Zones** | **HQ** |
| Northern Zone | Anuradhapura AB |
| Eastern Zone | China Bay AB |
| Southern Zone | Ratmalana AB |
| Western Zone | Katunayake AB |

## Going supersonic

Despite the number of aircraft and airmen remaining similar, the order of battle evolved significantly through to the end of 1994. The first major evolution came in 1991 and was a direct result of Operation Poomalai on 4 June 1987. During the latter, Indian Air Force transport aircraft escorted by Mirage 2000 jet fighters had penetrated Sri Lankan airspace and dropped food over the Jaffna Peninsula – which was widely felt as a national humiliation. This led the SLAF to decide to acquire at least some limited air-defence capability.

However, it soon turned out that the only country both willing and able to provide jet combat aircraft at affordable prices was the People's Republic of China. Even then, when the SLAF requested to buy A-5 Fantan ground-attack jets, much more potent in terms of air-to-ground missions, Beijing refused, and made it known that it would sell only F-7 interceptors. In August 1990, a SLAF delegation to China visited the Chengdu Aircraft Corporation factory, and the Sri Lankans eventually decided to buy a hybrid version of the design. The weapon system, avionics and fuselage corresponded to the F-7B variant, but the reinforced wings were from the F-7P, thus allowing the fighters to carry a significantly heavier payload. The resulting F-7BS could carry two-drop tanks and either two Mk.82 bombs or two rocket pods, aside from its two 30mm guns, with 30 rounds each. Nevertheless, it remained what it was – a point defence interceptor ill-adapted for CAS (close air support) or BAI (battlefield interdiction) missions because of its limited range and weapon-carrying capability.

But the F-7 deal was much more than a simple jet acquisition programme, because the SLAF had by then withdrawn its fleet of Jet Provost, MiG-17 and MiG-15UTI aircraft a decade since, and the pilots who use to fly these had retired. Hence, the order included not only four F-7BSs (CF-704, CF-705, CF-707 and CF-708) and a single FT-7 (CTF-703), but also a pair of Chengdu FT-5s (CTF-701 and CTF-702) for advanced training. The seven aircraft were assigned to a new unit, No.5 Jet Squadron, which was activated at Katunayake AB on 1 February 1991.[22] Meanwhile, six experienced Sri Lankan pilots began their conversion under the guidance of a team of Chinese instructors once the FT-5s were delivered, as explained by Squadron Leader Harsha Abeywickrama, the first CO of the new unit:

> I was instructed to take over the squadron, but there was no existing infrastructure. Sqn Ldr Roger Weerasinghe who was the CO No.4 Squadron at the time offered me a small room with a table within his squadron premises. I made it clear to the Air Force hierarchy that I wished to pick the pilots that would train with me. Upul Samarakoon was the first to be approached but he declined to come on board due to personal reasons. I was successful in selecting five pilots who would undergo jet training. The squadron was housed in an old auditorium that was refurbished and we gradually began to put things together. The apron in front of the '747' hangar which belonged to Airlanka at the time was to be the parking shed of the new jets.

A pair of F-7BSs (the registration CF707 is visible in the foreground) shortly after their service entry with No.5 Jet Squadron in 1991. (SLAF)

> Two FT-5 trainers were acquired in July 1991 and we commenced training with three People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) instructors and an interpreter, known as 'Charlie'. The Chinese instructors did not speak any English and we did not have a grasp of Mandarin which caused frustration at times, especially when flying; all communications had to be routed via the interpreter with no flying experience who would be in the air traffic control. We went through hell.[23]

The trainees also proved unruly on occasions, largely because they were impatient to fly solo, beginning with Harsha Abeywickrama. Feeling himself ready to do so but confronted with a refusal by the PLAAF instructors, he simply waited for a Sunday, when the Chinese were not on the base, to make his first solo flight. For political reasons, the instructors were not allowed to train their pupils in air-to-ground missions, but the SLAF eventually circumnavigated this by sending three pilots to Pakistan for a one-month course with the Pakistan Air Force in 1991. After the lengthy training process, which lasted around a year and a half, five pilots – Harsha Abeywickrama, Priyantha Gunasinghe, Sudarshana Pathirana, Janaka Wijethilake and Sajeewa Hendavitharana – became operational on F-7BSs, thereby completing the complex process of reintroducing high-end combat aircraft into SLAF service.[24]

**Table 5: Order of Battle, SLAF, 1994**

| Unit (abbreviation) | Type of aircraft |
|---|---|
| No.1 Flying Training Wing (FTW) | Cessna 150, SF.260W, SF.260TP, Pucara |
| No.201 Heavy Transport Squadron | HS.748, Y-8 |
| No.202 Light Transport Squadron | King Air B200T, Cessna 412, Y-12 |
| No.3 Maritime Squadron | Cessna 337 (withdrawn from service) |
| No.401 Helicopter Squadron | Bell 206, Bell 212 |
| No.402 Helicopter Squadron | Bell 206, Bell 412 |
| No.5 Jet Squadron | F-7B, FT-5 |
| No.6 Helicopter Squadron | Mi-17 |

### New inductions

In 1990 and 1991, the SLAF acquired 12 SIAI-Marchetti SF.260Ws from the Union of Myanmar (the former Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma), via a Belgian third-party seller, considerably reinforcing No.1 Flying Training Wing. These were mainly used for training duties but were also regularly engaged in combat missions. In 1992 and 1993, the same unit benefited from the delivery of four FAM

One of three Hawker-Siddeley HS.748 medium transports operated by No.2 Transport Wing in the early 1990s. This example (registration CR-835) was one of two shot down near Palali AB within a matter of a few hours on 29 April 1995. (SLAF)

A Bell 206 (registration CH-557) of the SLAF, while underway armed with a pod for unguided rockets. The SLAF continued purchasing additional helicopters of this type through the 1980s, but because they proved vulnerable to ground fire, increasingly used them for training purposes and reconnaissance. (SLAF)

IA-58 Pucaras procured in Argentina. To prepare for their induction, three pilots – Shirantha Goonetileke, Priyantha Adikaram and Pamunu Mahamalage – were sent to Argentina to follow a conversion course. This quartet of strike aircraft came in good time to compensate for the Air Force decision to cease using its Y-8 and Y-12 transport aircraft for bombing missions, in 1992 and 1993 respectively, and was also a major improvement in terms of firepower compared to the SF.260 and F-7GS. Indeed, a single Pucara could carry as much as 1.5 tons of weapons on its wings and underbelly pylons in addition to its two 20mm cannons and four Browning 7.62mm MGs. The aircraft, tailor-made for COIN (counterinsurgency) warfare, and with STOL (short take-off and landing) capability, was able to fly much faster than the SF.260TP, while carrying almost five times more armament. However, the four IA-58s suffered from corrosion problems, while the supply of spare parts proved problematic, which weighed heavily in the balance when the service decided to withdraw them in 1997.[25]

No.2 Transport Wing benefited from the delivery of two Avro HS 748s in 1990 and 1992, while three additional Y-12s, which by then had proven a highly popular design in SLAF service because of its versatility, were also inducted in 1990. In 1993, a third Y-8 was delivered to replace one lost in 1992. Furthermore, three brand new Mi-17s were ordered directly from Kazan Helicopters in Russia. These arrived at Katunayake AB aboard An-124 Condor transport aircraft on 15 March 1993. The Sri Lankan airmen were highly satisfied with the type because it could carry twice the number of passengers as the Bell 212, and the three helicopters were assigned to a newly raised unit, No.6 Helicopter Squadron (CO Squadron Leader Gagan Bulathsinghala), formed around a core of experienced Bell 212 pilots. The conversion process was straightforward, with each crew logging between 20 and 25 flight hours, and the squadron was declared operational on 29 April 1993. The Mi-17s were heavily used from the onset: by the year's end, No.6 Squadron had accumulated 1,637.57 flight hours.[26]

The SLAF order of battle evolved significantly on 15 September 1992, when No.2 Transport Wing was split between No.201 Heavy Transport Squadron and No.202 Light Transport Squadron. The following year, No.3 Maritime Squadron became virtually dormant once the Cessna 337s were withdrawn from service, while it was the turn of No.4 Helicopter Wing to be split in two in 1994. No.401 Helicopter Squadron became responsible for training and operational missions, and thus received the Bell 212s and most of the Bell 206s, while No.402 Helicopter Squadron operated the Bell 412s and the remaining Bell 206s, mostly for VIP flights.[27]

# 2
# RISING TIGERS

In 1981, there were around 1.4 million Tamils in Sri Lanka, and roughly a million of them were living in areas either controlled by or under the influence of the LTTE. Around 36 percent were living in the Jaffna Peninsula, 26 percent in the Vanni in the north and the remaining 38 percent in the east. This was a very small demographic pool to sustain the kind of protracted war initiated by the LTTE – but the LTTE attempted to make the most of it.[1]

When the war resumed, the government established an economic blockade on the Jaffna Peninsula and the Vanni, and these regions became virtually isolated from the outside world, suffering from

countless shortages, especially in fuel and petrol. As a result, a number of vital goods had to be smuggled in, with the price of commodities such as petrol reaching as much as 2,000 LKR (Sri Lankan Rupees) per litre – plunging these regions' economies into a state of subsistence. Consequently, the LTTE reinforced its para-state, which became an essential provider of services for the local civilian populations by running its own justice and police, but also providing schooling and health services, notably with its own relief agency, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO). Ironically, the LTTE benefited from government financial support to do so, as Colombo continued to pay the salaries of the civil servants stationed in these areas. Wherever practicable, the movement corseted the Tamil populations into a dense web of associations such the 'Birds of Freedom' – its women's political wing – or the Students' Organisation of Liberation Tigers (SOLT).[2]

To funds its activities, the movement also heavily taxed the population under its control, but the income that could be drawn from the impoverished and economically devastated Jaffna Peninsula and Vanni regions were in essence limited, whereas the eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara – which did not suffer from the same isolation – provided much better revenues. However, what in essence sustained the LTTE war effort remained the Tamil diaspora abroad, which was also tightly regulated by an array of front associations and provided a continuous flow of funds.

An essential part of the LTTE's ability to exercise such an influence on the Tamil populations both in Sri Lanka and abroad was its highly developed and extremely efficient propaganda apparatus, which included dozens of radio and TV stations and written publications, allowing it to channel its core ideological messages. This ideology was totalitarian in nature: only an independent Tamil homeland could end the suffering of the Tamil people, and only the LTTE had the ability to obtain independence, and thus was the sole legitimate representative of the Tamil people. Meanwhile, the movement itself was inextricably linked with its supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who embodied the struggle. Another cornerstone of this ideology became the cult of martyrs, to the point that the more casualties the LTTE suffered, the more it had to reach its ultimate goal of an independent Tamil Eelam, as emphasised by its leader when interviewed by a journalist during the early 1990s: "Thousands of my boys have laid down their lives for Eelam. Their death cannot be in vain. They have given their life for this cause, how can I betray them by opting for anything less than Eelam?"[3]

Hence, the martyr cult was emphasised through dedicated events such as Maaveerar Naal (Hero Week) at the end of each November, or the building of numerous Maaveerar Thuyilum illam (Great Heroes' Resting Houses), where the dead militants were buried. In the meantime, LTTE-controlled areas were dotted with pictures paying tribute to the movement's fighters killed in action – with an emphasis on the Black Tigers. The implicit message to the living was that they had to prove themselves worthy of the sacrifices made by the dead in the pursuit of the LTTE ideals, and thus be willing to follow their example.

A large number of civilians were regimented into auxiliary forces such as the Eela Padai, Grama Padai or Thunai Padai (the Eela, Rural and Support Forces, respectively). While not engaged in combat operations *per se*, these different organisations and forces were used to channel manpower to dig trenches, build bunkers and entrenchments, carry supplies or even evacuate casualties from the front lines.[4]

The movement also created what could be described as a cadet corps, largely dedicated to orphan children, both male and female. Aside from the usual schooling, members were also indoctrinated and submitted to para-military training. They were also frequently engaged in the immediate vicinity of the front lines to support the fighters in the same fashion as the other auxiliary forces. This unit, the Siruthai Padai (Leopard Force), was widely known as the 'Baby Brigade', which was the nickname given to it by the security forces. It was, however, not always easy to distinguish children of the Siruthai Padai from those embedded in combat units, as the LTTE became renowned for its recruitment of youngsters, with many well under the age of 18.[5]

Almost as soon as New Delhi announced its intention to withdraw the IPKF from Sri Lanka, the LTTE launched a campaign to significantly bolster its ranks. As a result, from around 2,000 combatants in late 1989, the movement rapidly grew to more than 5,000 only a year later. This photograph was taken during one of the major parades shortly before the outbreak of Eelam War II. (LTTE release)

## Total war

When the Indian Army's peacekeepers began their withdrawal in September 1989, the LTTE had roughly 2,000 fighters. During the following months, the Tigers engaged in a large-scale recruitment and training programme, and by the end of 1990, their number of effectives reached 5,000. Following its string of victories during the second half of that year, it increased again the size of its armed wing, reaching 7,000 during 1991. The strength continued to rise until it stabilised around roughly 10,000 combatants until the end of Eelam War II. While these numbers looked relatively modest, they were nonetheless very significant when related to the available pool of recruitment. It was even more so because the losses caused by the conflict's escalation were rising – and fast. Indeed, between 1990 and 1994, the LTTE lost no less than 4,663 fighters killed in action, and this is without counting those injured and no longer able to fight, who needed to be replaced too.[6]

A direct consequence of this was that the movement increased its pressure to recruit the necessary fighters. While its claims of enlisting only volunteers remained largely true during the war's first years, this changed over time. Although outright forced recruitment remained only occasional, but not totally unknown, it already became the norm by 1991 that every household was expected to provide a fighter – with a number of so-called 'volunteers' being motivated to do so mostly to avoid their brethren having to share the same fate. What made things particularly complex is that a number of fighters could have been compelled to enlist through indirect or direct force, but were still convinced by the movement's propaganda, while the security forces' atrocities acted as the most powerful LTTE recruitment tool. Furthermore, the insurgents could also be perceived as a means of social advancement among the most impoverished. Indeed, it must be emphasised that the LTTE was also an egalitarian movement, with most of its leaders having come from the lower castes, and this in the otherwise highly hierarchical Tamil society.

This had several major consequences throughout the conflict. While on the governmental side, the conflict represented a heavy burden, it did however remain limited in the sense that Colombo did not commit anything like all possible resources to win the war. Yet it was the opposite on the other side. The LTTE-dominated areas were virtually living in a state of total war, where almost all available resources – economic as well as human – were harnessed to fuel the war effort. Another consequence, more related to the LTTE war machine itself, was that the paucity in manpower further reinforced its military professional ethos, which had characterised the movement from the outset. It always had to make the most of its limited number of fighters, and thus invested heavily in their training in order to maximise their effectiveness.[7]

## Breeding the Tigers

The LTTE's military branch continued to use the training system inherited from the time its militants were trained in India, although its content was very much adapted to the movement's specific needs. New recruits thus followed a three-month basic training course, and a number of them were in turn selected to follow on with a second, advanced three-month course.

A major difference to the curriculum in use in regular armies was the emphasis placed on political indoctrination. Living conditions were spartan; in the early 1990s, the recruits were not even issued with shoes. Their only recreation was one daily hour of sport, such as soccer, and the screening of war movies dubbed in Tamil, and with all 'unproper' scenes – that is, showing sexual promiscuity – cut out. In the LTTE martial ethos, allowing the pursuit of worldly pleasures was bound to make fighters weaker. Discipline was fierce, and the use of physical punishment a common occurrence.

In the early 1990s, firearms were still not abundant, and the recruits initially had to make do with wooden sticks, which they had to treat as a real weapon. Nonetheless, the recruits were progressively initiated in the use of different kind of firearms, small unit tactics and the use of explosives, and this culminated at the end of the training period with all-out combat rehearsals. Trainees were also sent to the battlefield and tasked with support duties to harden them further – often at the price of significant casualties. Once their training was completed, the new fighters were formally inducted into the movement with a graduation ceremony, during which they received their cyanide phial – the infamous *kupi* – and swore allegiance to the movement and its leader.

Members of one of the LTTE's officer training courses in 1992. (LTTE release)

A typical LTTE classroom in around 1993. (LTTE release)

**Table 6: LTTE Basic Training course, ca. 1991**

| Time | Task |
|---|---|
| 0500–0900 | breakfast, alert combat drill, parade, physical training |
| 0900–1100 | weapons, explosives, camouflage, tactics and military history courses |
| 1100–1230 | snack, then obstacle courses |
| 1230–1345 | wash-up, lunch, rest time |
| 1345–1600 | camp cleaning, political courses |
| 1600–1700 | parade, close-order drill |
| 1700–1800 | sports |
| 1800–1830 | alert drill |
| 1830–2000 | personal hygiene, dinner |
| 2000–2200 | collective watching of international news and movies |
| 2200–0500 | rest time, with sentry duties on rotation (one hour per trainee) |

While basic and specialised training of new recruits was decentralised and controlled by the LTTE ground forces' main units and structures, usually taking places in separate camps dealing with 150-strong batches of recruits, officer training was centralised. The movement ran a unique Officer Training School in Chavakachcheri in the Jaffna Peninsula, and to attend it was mandatory for all commanders from platoon leader upwards. Hence, local commands and specific units, from both the male and female wings, selected candidates to send to the officer school, where they were trained for between six months and a year, depending on the time they had to interrupt their curriculum to be sent to the front line in the event of a crisis. A peculiarity of the school was that female and male students attended courses together, although they slept in separated quarters.

The would-be officers practised drills, parades and sports, but the bulk of their activities comprised lessons, lasting between six and eight hours per day, where they were taught about tactics and leadership, as well as enemy tactics and organisation. They were also taught about military history, studying battles such as Stalingrad and D-Day, but emphasis was placed on insurgencies, such as the Viet Cong in the Vietnam War. They also attended lectures about great leaders such as Napoleon, Sun Tzu, Mao and Subhas Chandra Bose.[8]

### Tigresses

Initially, female fighters were few in number, as at most 10 such sections were engaged against the IPKF in October 1987. Allegedly, the decision to allow women to take part in combat operations was taken by Velupillai Prabhakaran after repeated requests from female LTTE militants. What is certain is that the Indian National Army in the Second World War under Subhas Chandra Bose, who had allowed for the inception of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, staffed only by females, in 1943, could only have set an example for the LTTE supremo to follow. Whatever the case, ever larger numbers of young women began to rally to the LTTE in 1988 and 1989 and were trained in the movement's jungle bases.[9]

The growing number of female combatants enticed the movement to create a separate women's military wing, which came into being on 26 September 1989. The wing was initially led by Sothia (an alias of Maria Vasanthi Michael) until her death in early 1990. The wing in turn created two major training camps in Kallaly and Polygandy

Young women of one of the LTTE's female squads during a break in their training. In the early 1990s, the famous 'tiger stripes' uniforms introduced around the same time were still rare. All the members of this platoon were already equipped with the ubiquitous 'ChiCom' load-carrying vests and Chinese variants of the famous Soviet-made Kalashnikov assault rifle. (LTTE release)

A female RPG team of the LTTE during their training. (LTTE release)

in the Jaffna Peninsula, along with other smaller facilities, including one in the east, which were inaugurated on 13 August 1990. It also controlled all the female combat units. Indeed, by the end of 1992, the women's military wing had grown virtually into a parallel armed branch, with its own medical, anti-tank, anti-aircraft and military intelligence subunits.[10]

Allowing women to fight was very much part of the movement's ideology, which promulgated enhancing women's social status while allowing it to expand its recruitment pool. On the other hand, the LTTE remained as puritan as the notoriously conservative Tamil society, which made promiscuity between unrelated male and females taboo, and the movement avoided breaking this strong social rule by keeping its women separated from men. Indeed, sexual intercourse between female and male cadres remained strictly prohibited, unless they married first, after due approval by their respective hierarchy. Consequences for infringers of this rule could be dramatic – even deadly.

**Table 7: LTTE Regional Commands, known combat units, known commanders, 1991–93**

| Region or Unit | Notes |
|---|---|
| Jaffna | CO Sivandan Somasekaran, alias 'Bhanu' |
| Vanni | CO Velayuthapillai Baheerathakumar, alias 'Theepan' |
| Mannar | |
| Trincomalee | |
| Batticaloa | CO Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, alias 'Karuna Amman' |
| Charles Anthony Padai Ani | CO Kandiah Balasegaran, alias 'Balraj' |
| Imran Pandian Padai Ani | CO Soosaipillai Joseph Anthony Das, alias 'Sornam' |
| Jenyanthan Padai Ani | |
| Pasilan Mortar Unit | CO 'Lamba' (until his death in 1991) |
| Radha Unit | |
| Captain Miller Unit | CO 'Kadhafi' |

### Rise of the Padai Ani

With the resumption of the war and the expansion of the fighting force, it became no longer possible for the LTTE to operate solely with the former system of geographical commands and sub-commands controlling a varying number of 15-strong sections. From at least 1990, the military wing thus reorganised these units in 12-strong sections, attached to platoons of 40 fighters, and in turn 150-strong companies. These continued to be coordinated via the area and the regional commands – whose leaders were designated as Special Commanders – thanks to the movement's highly efficient and sophisticated radio communication network. From 1990 onwards, there were five such regional commands: the Jaffna (Jaffna Peninsula), Vanni (Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu districts), Mannar, Trincomalee and Batticaloa (Batticaloa and Ampara districts) commands. These had not only permanently attached combat units, both male and female, but also support services in charge of logistics, training or communication.[11] In time, they also had detachments of Sea Tigers permanently assigned. The Batticaloa region, under Karuna Amman, was the most self-sufficient of the five because it was geographically isolated from the other four regions, to the point that some militants eventually described it as an "LTTE within the LTTE". Its importance was crucial because it was waging a largely guerrilla war from a series of bases hidden in the jungles and the coastal areas, and was tying down a large number of Sri Lankan troops with a minimal number of fighters, and thus was able to send many badly needed recruits to the north.[12]

In the LTTE's terminology, the small-sized units were defined as 'force units' (*padaipirivu*). However, by 1991, the LTTE had already

During the early 1990s, the LTTE was still relatively short of military-grade communication systems. Consequently, it used relatively heavy radios (one backpack was usually issued to every company commander), and civilian grade 'walkie-talkies', both of which are visible in this photograph. (LTTE release)

concluded that it needed something different and began to raise much larger 'Special Regiments', which were to play a decisive role in the war, as explained by Velupillai Prabhakaran when talking about the coming into being of the first of these units:

> It was a time when the enemy was preparing to invade our heartland. I realised that we could not face the onslaught with guerrilla tactics and that to tilt the military balance in our favour we had to prepare for the next stage of military development. Therefore, I decided to form a fighting formation as a precursor to the development of our conventional warfare capability.[13]

Designated *Padai Ani*, from the outset these included several companies – usually known after their CO's *nom de guerre* – and were attached directly to the movement's central leadership.[14] As such, these were the third layer of the LTTE ground forces and acted as a strategic reserve. Correspondingly, they were engaged either to conduct specific offensive operations or defensive battles in coordination with the regional commands' units.

The first such unit was the Charles Anthony Padai Ani, which was officially raised on 10 April 1991 around a core of 1,500 fighters, under their CO 'Balraj'. This was followed by a second, 600-strong unit, the Imran Pandian Padai Ani, which came into being during the second half of 1991 while led by 'Sornam', becoming known as the personal unit of the LTTE's supremo: its troops wore dog tags with identification numbers which began with '0'. Finally, the Jeyanthan Padai Ani was activated on 4 May 1993, although it only became operational months later, as 1,500 recruits from the eastern districts first had to travel to the Vanni before undergoing training at the One Four base complex. All these units were named after a fighter killed in action. Charles Anthony was one of the first combatants lost by the movement, Imran and Pandian were the aliases of two fighters killed in combat against Indian troops, while Jeyanthan was the alias of Sampukuddi Pathmanthan, killed while conducting a suicide attack against an SLN ship. The Tigers were obviously inspired by their enemy's regimental system to promote a strong unit identity. They not only had their battle flags, but also their own mottos, such as 'Do or Die' for the Charles Anthony Padai Ani and 'We will go anywhere, we will win anything' for the Jeyanthan Padai Ani. These had comparatively significant firepower, as their 12-men sections each included an LMG and an RPG by 1992, while one MMG was attached to each platoon. In turn, the company HQ also controlled a single HMG (heavy machine gun) and a sniper team.

Interestingly, from the outset these units ran their own training facilities to form their cadres. They provided raw recruits with both the basic and advanced three-month training sessions.[15] These facilities were used to provide the soldiers with a thorough and protracted training, where they were taught to conduct both classic guerrilla and semi-conventional operations. From the start, they benefited from large ammunition allocations and thus conducted frequent live-fire and fire-and-movement exercises. Indeed, the motto of Balraj, the Charles Anthony Padai Ani's commander, was that for each bullet fired in battle, another 10 were to be fired in training. Furthermore, while still not plentiful in the movement, the Tigers took great care to provide their crack units with large amounts of communication equipment, including walkie-talkies for section leaders, while they were engaged in battle – giving them a major advantage. Training also emphasised night combat, which paid handsome dividends as the Tigers thereby held a distinct advantage in this field over the SLA. Indeed, most of their attacks against enemy positions took place during moonless nights.

A fighter of the Charles Anthony Padai Ani in around 1992. (LTTE release)

By 1992, the LTTE infantry formations had become especially deadly while engaged in defensive battles. They made good use of well-camouflaged positions and snipers, with extensive employment of mines, booby-traps and IEDs to delay enemy advances. Their standard tactic was to fight what the LTTE called a 'battle of infiltration'. The enemy was lured into advancing and thus exposing its flanks. Once these became elongated, the Tigers manoeuvred around them and launched multiple infiltrations, with an emphasis on penetrating the middle of the enemy formation. Time and again, the LTTE managed to inflict significant casualties on advancing enemy forces by using this combination of delaying tactics against their front and counterattacks against their flanks. This was mixed with another standard tactic which consisted of not resisting an SLA advance to create complacency, only to draw the enemy into carefully prepared ambush sites.

### From the quest for firepower …

However, and regardless how adept they were in mobile infantry operations, the Tigers met with immense difficulties when having to overrun fortified SLA defensive perimeters. One answer was to opt for launching their attacks only during moonless nights to mitigate enemy firepower, but a vexing problem for the movement was its own endemic lack of firepower. Even 81mm mortars were at a premium, with a crack 600-strong force such as the Imran Pandian Padai Ani having a single 60mm and 81mm mortar platoon permanently attached. Hence, the Tigers developed a series of solutions to this issue, which were used between 1990 and 1991.

The Tigers had no choice but to turn toward their own cottage industry, which was already producing ever-larger quantities of Johnny anti-personnel mines or Arul 89 grenades. In July 1990, a small team of LTTE engineers and technicians under Kutti Sri, the movement's mortar specialist, were ordered to develop a powerful support weapon. After several tests, during which one of the mortar tubes exploded, they came up with a new design, which was baptised the Pasilan 2000. The device was in essence a mortar launching a projectile whose massive warhead protruded from the tube before firing. The head was of aluminium, 1.5 metres long, contained around 25kg of gelignite and was designed to project thousands of pieces of shrapnel once it detonated. This was nicknamed 'Baba' by the Sri Lankan soldiers; a second variant of the shell, nicknamed 'Gini Baba', was filled with incendiaries. The Pasilan could be used from a fixed emplacement on the ground or mounted on civilian tractors to give it better tactical mobility. By August, around 10 such systems had already been produced in the movement's workshops, and these

were assigned to a dedicated force, the Pasilan Mortar Unit, led by a militant known as Lamba.

However, while devastating, the Pasilan had numerous drawbacks. Firstly, the LTTE struggled to design a reliable fuse, and a large proportion of the projectiles were duds, at least during this phase of the war. Their rate of fire was also slow because of the sheer size of the projectiles. But the worst problem was their range – only between 600 and 1,000 metres – which forced the mortar teams to build entrenchments and set their weapons well within range – and sometimes in direct sight – of enemy garrisons. Furthermore, while used at night, a Pasilan opening fire generated a massive flash and thus virtually guaranteed that the battery would find itself on the receiving end of counterbattery mortar fire. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Pasilan was superseded by 81mm and 120mm mortars almost as soon as the movement acquired larger numbers of these from 1993 onwards. These mortars were also concentrated in a single unit, which later became the Kutti Sri Padai Ani.[16]

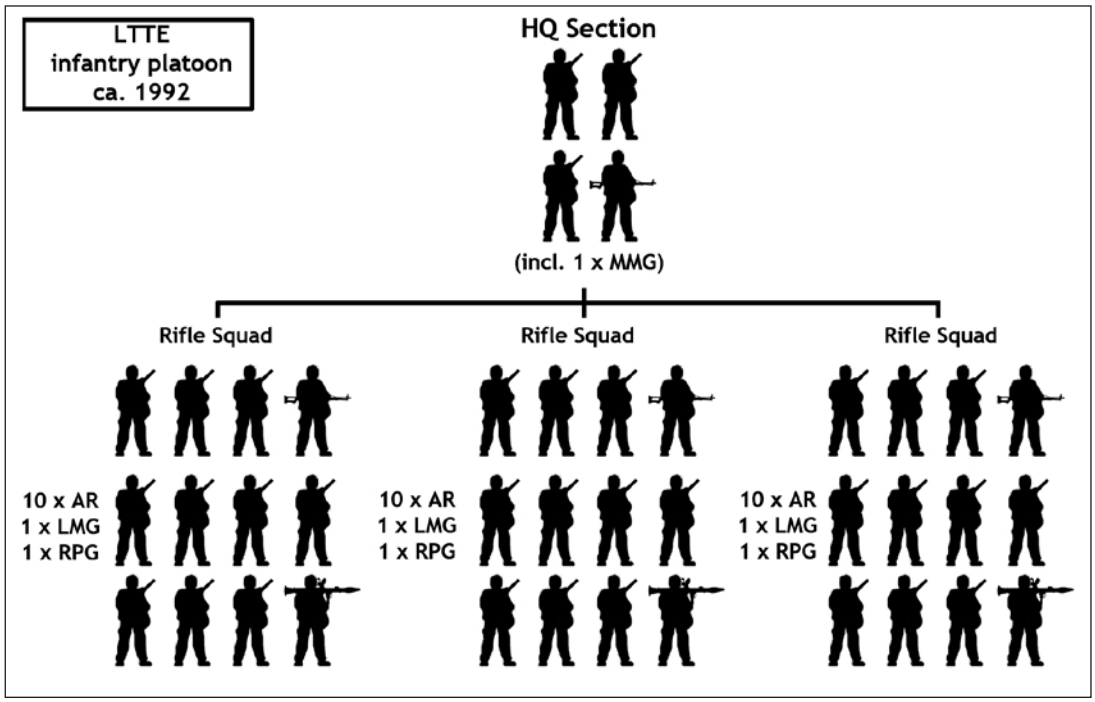
The LTTE took over another innovation from other Tamil militant groups during the previous decade, producing several heavily armoured bulldozers, and tried to use them as armoured rams to break through enemy camps, clearing a way for their infantry. The movement also reactivated its suicide-squad, created in 1987, which had remained dormant during the Indian intervention. In 1990 and 1991, the Black Tigers continued to follow the tactic inaugurated on 5 July 1987 by 'Miller' (the alias of Vallipuram Vasanthan), who had driven a truck filled with explosives into an army camp. Notably, the movement also raised the 'long-range sniper unit', which was later renamed as the Mayuran Sniper Padaippirivu. Equipped with dedicated sniper rifles, as well as birdwatching binoculars for the spotters, this unit had 150 fighters by 1993. One of their favourite tactics was to establish their firing positions in treetops, and they were trained to target enemy officers.[17]

### … to other answers

However, by the end of 1991 and after having suffered devastating losses during attacks against SLA camps, it had become obvious that the Tigers' tactics were not working. Pasilan mortars proved insufficient to soften a fortified target for a successful infantry assault. Furthermore, the use of suicide bomb-trucks to breach enemy defences was of limited tactical value. Such trucks could not advance with enough speed in rough terrain, and their avenues of approach were easy enough to predict. Even small ditches or trenches could present insurmountable obstacles, while such vehicles were large targets, highly vulnerable to enemy fire. No matter how these vehicles – bulldozers included – were up-armoured, they remained hopelessly vulnerable to weapons such as the RPG-7. Indeed, the two known suicide truck attacks against enemy positions that took place during the first year of the war all failed to provide decisive results.

Following their defeat during the protracted battle for Elephant Pass in mid-1991, the LTTE leadership reassessed their tactics – with far-reaching consequences. The need for more support weapons was obvious, but addressing the problem was not straightforward because getting enough of them remained difficult. The military leaders opted instead to create a new specialised reconnaissance outfit, the Viseda Vevu Pitivu. From that time on, major offensives were preceded by months of protracted and intensive intelligence gathering, until virtually every possible detail about the targeted objective was known, from bunker emplacements to sentries' rotation pattern. The assaults were not only prepared with detailed sandboxes, but also sometimes with full-scale models of specific positions, and rehearsed multiple times. Furthermore, whenever possible, the LTTE opted for multi-pronged simultaneous attacks along carefully identified avenues of approach, making the most of any detected flaw in the enemy defensive dispositions. In essence, almost manic preparations were employed in an attempt to overcome their lack of firepower.

The Tigers always emphasised what they called 'strategic deception'. Any major offensive was preceded by a diversionary attack elsewhere to keep the enemy wrong-footed. What did not change, however, was that all large-scale operations were carried out under the direct control of the LTTE leader, who usually selected a deputy to act as a forward commander and coordinator. The latter position was often given to the most respected and experienced commanders – most of whom could be distinguished because their alias was followed by 'Amman', the Tamil word for 'uncle'. The movement's military machine was highly flexible, and sub-units from the Padai Anis and the regional commands, reinforced with detachment from other support units, were routinely assembled together for specific operations, according to need.




A standard LTTE squad in the early 1990s consisted of 12 combatants. Three squads were combined with the HQ section to form a platoon of 40 troops. Three platoons, an HQ and a weapons section would form a company of about 130 men. From around 1992, the firepower of every squad was bolstered through the addition of one light machine gun and one RPG-7, although the number of troops remained the same. Every company was reinforced with a weapons section with two or three medium machine guns and two or three snipers. (Diagram by Tom Cooper)

Nonetheless, a vexing problem for the LTTE remained air defences. A first step taken

from 1990 onwards was to instruct their fighters to make a stand when confronted by SLAF helicopters, as explained by Wing Commander Sunil Cabral:

> During Eelam War I, LTTE cadres used to run away when helicopter gunships approached them. They feared the fighting machines. We always had the upper hand in engagements during Eelam War I battles. We noted a significant change in the attitude of LTTE cadres as well as their tactics only after fighting resumed during the second week of June 1990. During the battle for Kokavil, we quickly realised that they intended to engage helicopter gunships. The LTTE deployed 30 to 40 cadres to fire T-56 and AK 47 assault rifles simultaneously at approaching helicopters, hence creating a 'wall of fire'. Until the LTTE acquired shoulder-fired heat-seeking missiles, it adopted [this] strategy quite successfully.[18]

Although the motivation for specific ideas of its top commanders might appear 'dubious' in hindsight, there is little doubt that the LTTE strove to reach high levels of professionalism – at all levels of its military organisation. Company and platoon commanders in particular were expected to carefully brief their fighters before going into action, usually during meetings like this one, which took place in around 1993. (LTTE release)

However, this tactic remained hopelessly insufficient – especially as, until 1994, the movement's anti-aircraft capabilities remained limited to 12.7mm and 14.5mm heavy machine guns. These were operated by a dedicated unit, the Radha Padaippirivu, raised in 1991 once the LTTE procured its first two ZPU-2s, and named after a machine-gunner killed by a SLAF helicopter he engaged in 1987. These were enough to dissuade SLAF aircraft from flying below 1,000 metres and thus reduced the precision of airstrikes or the interdicting of specific landing zones, but not much more. Radha gunners were constantly frustrated in their attempts to shoot down SLAF aircraft – to the extent that some suspected something was wrong with the zeroing of their guns.[19]

### The Masters

From the outset, the LTTE had been renowned for the emphasis placed on military professionalism, which directly resulted from the leader of the movement's dedication to combat operations, rather than politics in a wider sense, as explained by a former fighter of the Imran Pandian Padai Ani:

> Prabhakaran watched every attack we did on video. If he sees any mistake we had done he said all the time if we do this again he will go to the place and do it himself. If he had something to do he did it without sleep. Whatever happens he got up at 4.00am. Thereafter he was at the office by 06.00. Always he had in his mind where to attack and where is the weak place. He always thinks about the training and the places where we can go forward in the war. He reads books which are written about foreign wars. Even his wife should wait at his door. She waits until somebody takes her in. He was a person who thinks his work should be done by himself. And also he learnt something new every time. He had a good idea what to do.[20]

A crucial – but less known – aspect that made the Tigers so efficient was the existence of a limited number of gifted strategists, who remained in the shadows and did not attract the attention received by characters such as the movement supremo himself, but also military commanders like Karuna Amman, Balraj or Theepan. Often with an academic background, and able to read extensively about their line of trade, these individuals formed a virtually shadow doctrinal and innovation branch. Foremost among them was Tinesh Master ('Master', in LTTE terminology, designated 'someone who is teaching others'), who was Velupillai Prabhakaran's main military adviser. A former academic, Tinesh Master had undergone special training provided by the RAW intelligence agency in India during the 1980s, before being injured in 1990 during an air attack, losing the use of his right hand, which remained paralysed. He was relieved from operational duties as a result. Thereafter, he not only advised the movement leader, but also controlled several crucial departments, which included weapons and ammunition development and production, but also the officer schools, military intelligence, a specialised long-range reconnaissance unit and, crucially, a research and translation department which selected military literature that was to be translated into Tamil and used to train the cadres.

Tinesh Master also oversaw a specific service in charge of assessing the LTTE units' battle experiences, drawing corresponding lessons from these and reorganising them accordingly. Notably, and especially in the event of failure, the officers involved were thoroughly interrogated about the specific engagements in order to assess what went wrong and why. This feedback process was almost dreaded among the LTTE officer corps – to the point that several cadres were known to have committed suicide to avoid it. Altogether, this contributed to making the LTTE a 'learning organisation' and gave it the ability to innovate quickly, thus regularly taking the enemy by surprise.

Other characters who proved instrumental in shaping the LTTE included Sankar Master, a trained aeronautical engineer, who was influential in creating the Sky Tigers; Brindan Master, who was the Sea Tigers' tactical mastermind; and Sasikumar Master, Janan Master and Mathavan Master, who all played a decisive role in shaping the LTTE intelligence apparatus.[21]

## Black Tigers

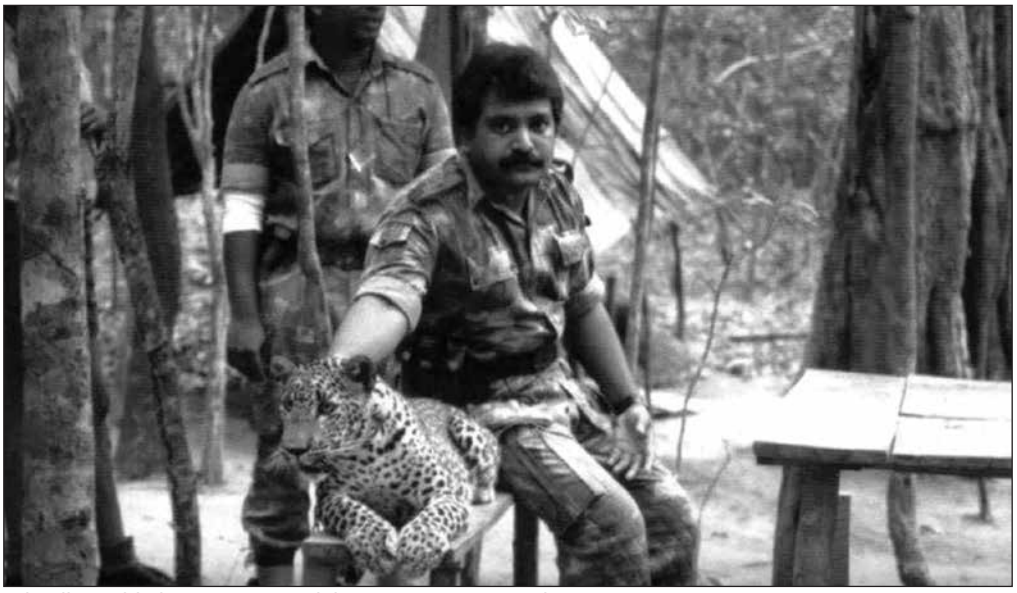
By July 1987, the LTTE had created a small team of Black Tigers, as the movement called its suicide-bombers. The Black Tigers were kept as a closely kept secret until 1992, when the movement publicised their existence, and they were thereafter celebrated with a 'Black Tiger Day' every year on 5 July. Velupillai Prabhakaran presented the Black Tigers as selfless heroes to be commemorated even more than other fighters killed in action during a speech held on that day in 1993:

> I have groomed my weak brethren into a strong weapon called Black Tigers … They are the balls of fire smashing the military prowess of the enemy with sheer determination. The Black Tigers are different and are also unique human beings. They possess an iron will, yet their hearts are so very soft. They have deep human characteristics of perceiving the advancement of the interest of the people through their own annihilation … They just don't bother about death. This is the Era of Black Tigers.[22]

The Black Tigers formed several distinct units. The most secretive was attached to the LTTE Intelligence Wing under Pottu Amman, and dedicated to assassinations or large-scale terrorist attacks. The Captain Miller unit, under Kadhafi – one of Prabhakaran's most trusted aides and bodyguards – specialised in military ground operations. While its operations were initially relatively unsophisticated in nature, consisting mainly in driving VBIEDs (vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices) against enemy positions, this unit thereafter turned into a Special Forces-like outfit, able to conduct long-range commando raids or infiltrations. Some of these missions did not necessarily require the death of the Black Tigers to succeed, although others were planned from the onset as one-way missions. The Black Tigers thus gained the reputation of being the 'best of the best' among the LTTE and were said to 'train even when they sleep'. The naval branch of the movement, the Sea Tigers, eventually created at least two Sea Black Tigers units during Eelam War II: the Mani Arasan Padai Ani operated suicide boats, while the Sulojan Padai Ani was a unit of suicide combat divers. The Sea Tigers later created two similar female units: the Nalayini Padai Ani for suicide boats and the Angayatkanni Padai Ani for suicide combat divers.

The LTTE ultimately acknowledged the loss of 241 Black Tigers killed in action between 5 July 1987 and 30 September 2002, including 37 between 1990 and 1994 – with the bulk of these being Sea Black Tigers. These numbers are deceptive, because Black Tigers operating under the Intelligence Wing were never acknowledged by the movement. Furthermore, Black Tigers and Sea Black Tigers who lost their lives in unsuccessful operations were not acknowledged by the movement propaganda – this honour being reserved for those who died fulfilling their mission. The Black Tigers were officially all volunteers, who had written a letter of candidature directly to Prabhakaran in order to join. Although numerous candidates were truly volunteers, the reality was often more murky: for example, on occasions, Tigers who had committed an infraction were left with the choice of facing punishment or volunteering as Black Tigers to redeem themselves, while the Sea Black Tigers were notorious for making extensive use of crippled fighters to drive the suicide-boats. Part of the deal was also that the LTTE made sure that Black Tiger families benefited from a privileged status in their communities.

Eventually, the rationale behind the Black Tigers' deployment on the battlefield was mainly that they were, from a military perspective, an efficient and cost-effective force multiplier, thus allowing the LTTE to compensate for its lack of firepower and sophisticated equipment. Notably, their use allowed the Sea Tigers to be on a par with the Sri Lankan Navy.[23]



Velupillai Prabhakaran posing with his pet jaguar. (LTTE release)

# 3
# UNDER SIEGE

Once the war erupted, the Sri Lankan Army found itself in a critical situation in the whole northern theatre. Once the IPKF arrived in Sri Lanka, the security forces had kept only a small number of garrisons in the whole region, and these were hopelessly isolated. In the Jaffna Peninsula, these were at Palali AB, Fort Jaffna, Karainagar naval base on the island of the same name and the Elephant Pass camp. In the Vanni, the camps of Omanthai, Mankulam, Kokavil and Kilinochchi were all located along the A9 road, while another camp was sited just outside the town of Mullaitivu, along the coast. Worse still, they were all garrisoned by only skeleton forces. For instance, only two platoons were in Mankulam and a single platoon in Kokavil – all drawn from the 3rd (V) Sinha – while Mullaitivu was defended by two platoons and Elephant Pass by a single company. Unsurprisingly, the Tigers kept all of these under siege, cutting them off from the outside world.[1]

## Fall of Kokkavil

It is thus hardly surprising that the LTTE first concentrated its forces against the most vulnerable of these outposts. From June onwards, it had tightened the noose on the Kokkavil camp, sited there to protect a crucial TV relay building, and cut it off from its water supply while emplacing machine guns to make any helicopter landing in the camp impossible. The SLAF Bell 212s had to drop iceboxes over the camp to make up for their lack of water. By 11 July 1990, the Tigers had massed many fighters and several Pasilan mortars around the camp, and they launched a large-scale assault that evening. Despite being hopelessly outnumbered, the 48 men of the garrison, under 2nd Lieutenant Saliya Aladeniya, managed to repulse the enemy attacks during the night, thanks to intensive fire support missions flown by the SLAF Bell 212 gunships and SF.260TPs, inflicting severe casualties: even Theepan, who was leading the assault, was injured. While the Tigers stayed hidden during the following day, it was obvious that the SLA platoon had virtually no chance of repulsing another similar assault the following night. The SLA rushed Commando troops from the east to Vavuniya in order to drop them at Kokavil, but they arrived only on the evening of 12 July, and the SLAF was unable to launch airborne assaults at night. That same evening, the LTTE began a new assault, this time led by Balraj, their Vanni commander, in person. Its fighters managed to breach the camp perimeter despite intensive SLAF air strikes, with the help of a lucky Pasilan hit which ignited the garrison's fuel tank. 2nd Lieutenant Aladeniya withdrew with a few survivors to the TV building, where he made his last radio contact with the SLA Vanni headquarters: "Now the terrorists have entered the building which I am holding on to, with a few soldiers. There is no escape and [the] end is near. We don't want to be taken as prisoners by the terrorists. Therefore, please get the Air Force to bomb the building so that both the terrorists and [us] will be killed."[2]

In the end, despite a group of soldiers attempting a desperate breakthrough, only two troops and a cook managed to reach SLA positions to tell of their unit's destruction.[3] The battle was the most important engagement so far fought by the LTTE women's military wing, during which it lost six fighters KIA according to Lucia, one of the Tigress commanders:

> The women fighters were given a specific area to operate in with specific tasks to be completed as part of the overall plan of attack. We were all confident that we would overrun the camp and that the women fighters would successfully carry out what was expected of them. On the first day we fought from late evening till early morning. We couldn't take the camp on the first night. Next day, again in the evening we launched a fresh offensive and after heavy fighting we captured the sentry points. Then in the early morning, we stormed in and overran the army camp.[4]

A few days after this disaster, Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa was assigned as CO of the 2nd Division and thus overall commander for the northern theatre, with Major General G.H. De Silva replacing him as commander of 3rd Division. True to his reputation, the new northern commander unleashed a series of operations during the following weeks in order to avert the crisis. On 15 July, six Bell 212s carried C Company of the 3rd Gajaba and a Commando team to Mankulam. The Landing Zone (LZ) was around 1km from the camp, but still monitored by the Tigers, and the Bells met with intense small-arms fire which damaged one of them, killing a soldier and a crewman. The Commandos and the infantrymen nonetheless broke out from the LZ and managed to reach the camp. Around two weeks later, the rest of the 3rd Gajaba was flown by helicopter to Mankulam, thereby alleviating the risk of the position being overrun. However, the insurgents had expected the SLAF's use of an LZ outside the camp, as one of them later recalled:

> We knew that if we blocked the helicopters from landing in this camp then [they] would drop the men somewhere behind it. One day, early in the morning, four helicopters dropped men exactly where we expected them to, in front of the Katkulam Lake. There were only a few of our *pooralis* ['someone waging a struggle against injustices', which is what the LTTE called its fighters] there at that time. [They] started firing all around the forest, from the helicopters. There were about 150 *pooralis*. Immediately, [they] began breaking the defence. We sent out the standby group as well. Most of the army men made it to their camp. Eight bodies of the army men were burned here.[5]

A much larger undertaking, Operation Gajasinghe, followed on 19 July to reinforce the beleaguered Kilinochchi camp. This camp was also in desperate straits, as its garrison consisted of a motley force with a platoon of the 6th Sinha and another of the 3rd (V) Singa, plus a few support personnel – some 90 men in all. Indeed, the camp had already been targeted by the Tigers in June, as recalled by one of the garrison's officers:

> I received instructions from Major General Stanley Silva on June 12, 1990 to make immediate arrangements to accommodate the entire police contingent at Kilinochchi in our camp. But to my surprise, the police declined to follow instructions. I was told of their decision to stay at the police stations. They probably felt the police station was safer than our camp! When the headquarters was informed of their refusal to move in to the Kilinochchi army camp, I was told to disarm them. We quickly removed all arms, ammunition and equipment along with two vehicles and a powerful motorcycle. Tamil policemen assured us that they would protect a

Balraj, the famous LTTE Vanni region commander, briefing some of his – rather youthful – combatants for a pending operation in 1991. (LTTE release)

group of Muslim policemen based there. There were 40 Muslims. At the time of the crisis, there wasn't a single Sinhala policeman in Kilinochchi.

On the night June 12, 1990 I got up after hearing a Sergeant reprimanding a soldier who was found sleeping in spite of strict instructions to be on alert due to the rapidly deteriorating situation. I sat on a chair facing the road. Shortly thereafter, a lorry moved past the camp carrying a group of people. Within minutes, I saw the same vehicle moving back northwards. I felt uneasy. The terrorists attacked our camp around 2.30 a.m. from the direction of the police station. Subsequently, we knew the LTTE had taken control of the police station before mounting its first attack on the Kilinochchi army camp.

We lost three [men killed], while seven received injuries. SLAF choppers made two abortive bids to land close to our camp to evacuate the wounded. We had one 120mm mortar with about 200 rounds. The 120mm tube and rounds had been kept in an abandoned house within the area held by the army. As the government was engaged in negotiations with the LTTE, we felt confident the mortar would never have to be used. Once they fired at the camp, I ordered those in charge of the weapon to prepare it for action. They pointed [out] that the weapon couldn't be deployed without the presence of an artillery officer. I pointed out that it was not the time to follow procedures. I ordered the immediate deployment of the weapon.[6]

Despite being caught unprepared by the eruption of the war, the Kilinochchi camp repulsed this and several other assaults – but this could not go on indefinitely. Hence, from 19 July 1990, 10 Bell 212s and 412s were dispatched to Palali AB, and from there carried the 5th Gemunu Watch and the 6th Gajaba to Elephant Pass, while covered by a Y-8 which dropped barrel bombs over suspected enemy positions. Once assembled, and operating under 7th Brigade Group (CO Colonel Gamini Angammana), they advanced southward along the A9 road – with one battalion covering one flank each – seizing Paranthan before reaching Kilinochchi town, which was cleared on 24 July after three days of fighting. However, Operation Gajasinghe did not pass without an enemy reaction, as explained by a sergeant major then serving in the 6th Gajaba:

> On the morning of July 21, the SLAF deployed 10 Bell 212s to shift the entire 6 GR from Palaly [*sic*] to a point very close to the Elephant Pass saltern. Our Commanding Officer, Maj. T.W. Jayawardena, and the second-in-command, Major A.N.J.C. Dias, led us. The landing took place without the LTTE knowing. Having moved the entire 6 GR battalion, the SLAF airlifted 5 GW. We positioned ourselves at Elephant Pass. On the following day, 22 July, 6 GR and 5 GW commenced advancing towards Paranthan. We

Although small and relatively light, SF.260TPs were the backbone of the SLAF's fighter-bomber fleet during the early 1990s, and their air strikes frequently turned the tables during the fighting on the ground. This example was photographed while loaded with a locally made 50kg bomb. (SLAF)

didn't take the road. Instead, we advanced southwards about 100 metres east of the road. As we advanced towards the Paranthan–Mullaitivu road, a major firefight erupted between advancing troops and the LTTE. The battle lasted for about four hours. We lost nine personnel, while 26 others received injuries. Having defeated the LTTE units, we secured Paranthan junction on that day, though we didn't advance further. On the following day, 23 July, we began advancing towards Kilinochchi. Although the LTTE resisted throughout the push, it couldn't halt advancing 6 GR and 5 GW troops. Finally, we reached Kilinochchi base around 17.30.[7]

Once the camp was relieved, 7th Brigade and the garrison of the camp withdrew toward Elephant Pass, successfully concluding Operation Gajasinghe at a cost of 15 soldiers KIA. On the opposite side of the Vanni, 1st and 4th Gajaba also swept through areas north of Vavuniya under Operation Tiger Hunt, which ran from 3 August.[8]

A view of one of the bastions of Fort Jaffna in 1993 – when the walls were largely covered by vegetation. Note the sandbags piled on the corners, where the SLA, and later on the LTTE, positioned medium and heavy machine guns. (LTTE release)

The Harbin Y-12 twin-engine turboprop light transport was a relatively new aircraft on the world market in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The SLAF deployed it for a multitude of tasks, including transport, but also reconnaissance and barrel-bomb attacks. This photograph shows the example with registration CR853: like the rest of the fleet, it originally had dark green overall livery. (SLAF)

## A beleaguered fort

Once the war resumed, Fort Jaffna immediately became a primary objective for the LTTE because of its highly symbolic location, as it was built on the coast in the very heart of Jaffna town. By 11 June, the fortress was occupied by a small SLA garrison of 51 men, including one officer, from the 6th Sinha Battalion, but these were reinforced by 119 police officers who withdrew from the neighbouring main Jaffna police station. Crucially, a troop of two 120mm mortars was also present in the fort, and even more importantly, large amounts of supplies and ammunition had been stockpiled there for years. Furthermore, the Vauban-patterned fortifications continued to present a formidable obstacle, not only because of the massive ditch in front of the walls, but because the latter offered an excellent field of fire for the defenders. The fort was also surrounded by a roughly 850-metre-wide no-man's-land that was almost devoid of cover.

Veluppillai Pirabhakaran and Bhanu, the LTTE's Jaffna military commander, opted initially for a protracted siege instead of launching assaults that would have undoubtedly caused heavy casualties. Hence, the Tigers reinforced and strengthened a chain of bunkers on their side of no-man's-land. These were extremely well-built and buried deep into the earth, with only a few centimetres protruding above ground. They were heavily protected, with their tops consisting of three layers: the first made of rails, the second of railway sleepers and the third of sandbags. Consequently, the bunkers were immune to anything but a direct hit from SLA mortars and artillery firing from the fort and nearby Palali, or from the SLAF aircraft striking the area. In the meantime, the militants also laid large numbers of their infamous Johnny mines in front of their positions and kept snipers in position watching the ramparts at all times. As a result, any SLA soldier exposing his body over the parapet was virtually signing his own death warrant.

Fort Jaffna was completely isolated from the outside, with the nearest security forces garrisons being Palali AB and the Karainagar naval base – which were both under siege too. The only way to receive supplies was from the air. However, the Tigers emplaced several 12.7mm HMGs close enough to the fort to make any helicopter landing in the internal parade ground suicidal. As a result, the SLAF had to resort to Y-12s dropping gunny bags while flying level at around 3,000ft, just outside the range of the enemy HMGs: obviously, this was

a rather imprecise practice. In an attempt to improve accuracy, the aviators opted to deploy a single Y-12 escorted by a pair of SF.260TPs for supply runs: all three aircraft would dive simultaneously, with the Y-12 literally 'dive-gunny-bagging' the garrison while the two SF.260TPs were making strafing passes on enemy positions surrounding the fort.

The Pasilan Mortar Unit began to batter the fort from the outset, firing shells randomly to keep the garrison under pressure at all times. While their shells could prove deadly initially, the besieged forces soon learned to mitigate this threat. Once the sentinels in the rampart heard (by day) or saw (by night) one of the mortars firing, they shouted to their comrades to jump into their shelters, and this proved enough to drastically reduce the garrison's casualties. Unable to venture into no-man's-land by night or day, the besieged soldiers also threw anti-personnel mines from the ramparts at night. While the devices were easy to see in daylight, they still were a deadly threat at night, and thus complicated any sudden night assault by the Tigers.

As the SLAF also multiplied its air strikes from Palali AB – just a dozen minutes' flight away – with the SLA artillery batteries located there doing likewise, the siege turned into a trial for the besiegers too, especially as the fort's garrison also had its own deadly snipers. The Tigers manning the bunker lines thus also had to stay put during the day, moving only by night.[9]

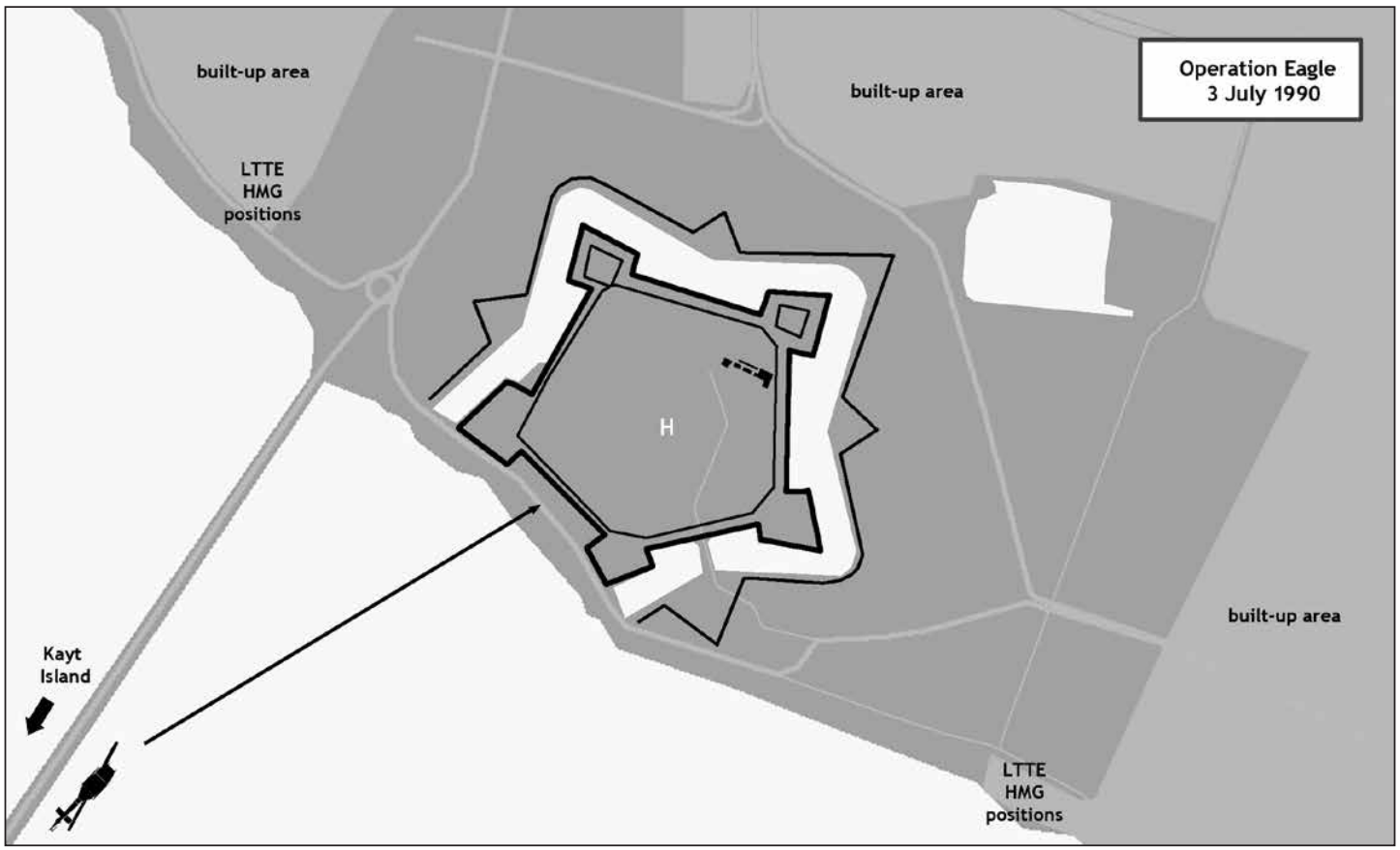
## Eagle over Jaffna

By the end of June, the garrison at Fort Jaffna had suffered numerous casualties who badly needed to be evacuated, while morale was hitting rock bottom, making the dispatch of a new commander necessary. After careful observations, a small area between the coast and the fort was selected which was partly covered by the fortress' star-pattern walls, and thus out of direct line of sight of the LTTE's machine gunners. A first attempt to land a helicopter was made during the night of 28 June, but the crew had to abort the mission because of heavy enemy fire and they realised that a telephone line crossed the intended LZ. Attempting to land on the only possible alternative LZ, in the fort's courtyard, was also out of the question for the aviators, who feared that doing so would create mayhem among the garrison, as explained by Squadron Leader Lasantha Waidyaratna:

> I simply didn't want to see over [a] hundred battle-weary men fighting each other to get into my helicopter. Anything would have been possible due to the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Jaffna Peninsula, as well as the Vanni mainland. Those under siege would have done simply anything to survive and nothing could have been better than a chopper ride out of Fort Jaffna.[10]

After barely avoiding a disaster, the SLAF opted to launch a second attempt, baptized Operation Eagle, but with much more thorough preparations. A crew composed of Squadron Leader Waidyaratna and Flight Officer Avindra Mirando was selected. They made several training flights aboard a Bell 412, using the bank of a reservoir near Anuradhapura AB to embark and disembark troops as fast as possible. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Jayantha Fernando of the 6th Sinha volunteered to take command of the fort. Once the new plan was ready, and as the Sri Lankans knew that the LTTE was monitoring their radio frequencies, an SF.260TP dropped a small container over the fort with the detailed schedule of the operation.

At 0400 hours on 3 July, Wing Commander Sunil Cabral took off aboard a Bell 212 acting as airborne command post and entered a holding pattern near the fort at 4,000ft. Shortly afterwards, a pair of Bell 212 gunships and two pairs of SF.260TPs joined the formation, ready to strike the LTTE positions around the fort as soon as the CASEVAC




A map depicting the route by which Squadron Leader Waidyaratna and Flight Officer Mirando managed to reach Fort Jaffna flying the Bell 412 registration CH-524 on 3 July 1990. (Map by Tom Cooper)

A worn-out Bell 412 of the SLAF, like the example flown by Squadron Leader Waidyaratna to Fort Jaffna on 3 July 1990. (SLAF)

(casualty evacuation) helicopter began its approach. Furthermore, three Y-12s and one Y-8 carrying barrel-bombs also flew on a holding pattern over Mannar Island to provide additional firepower if needed. Finally, Squadron Leader Waidyaratna and Flight Officer Mirando took off from Palali AB aboard the Bell 412 registration CH-524 at 0450 hours. A few minutes later, it was discovered that low cloud and mist covered the centre of Jaffna, making it impossible for the aircraft to initiate their strafing runs. Wing Commander Cabral nonetheless decided to initiate Operation Eagle: he called on the radio, "Maradona, Maradona", the code word confirming initiation of the operation's last phase.

The crew of CH-524, who had meanwhile reached Mandativu Island, descended to about 50ft above ground level and flew along the Pannai causeway towards the fort at a speed of 150km/h, while the two Bell 212 gunships began to strafe the LTTE positions surrounding it. The diversion proved successful, as the insurgents did not notice the low-flying Bell 412. Squadron Leader Waidyaratna described what followed:

> I flew very low over the Jaffna lagoon and landed just outside Fort Jaffna. I saw men carrying weapons in uniform. Within seconds, we realized they were our men. They were there to secure the landing site. One second there on the ground felt like one day. The army on the ground moved unbelievably fast. No sooner [had] Captain Jayantha Fernando and his men got off the helicopter, [than] the army rushed the seriously wounded men and placed them inside the chopper. They completed the task within just 45 seconds! The Bell 412 quickly climbed and was soon out of range of LTTE gunners. Having informed WC Cabral of the successful completion of the mission, I handed over the controls to Avindra Mirando. We reached Palaly [*sic*] within ten minutes. I was so happy I wanted to run around [the] runway. Instead, I ran around the chopper.[11]

Actually, the Tigers did see CH-524 while landing in the LZ and opened up with their mortars but had no time to zero-in their tubes. With Operation Eagle proving a success, the SLAF repeated the whole process with Operation Eagle II on 29 August. A Bell 212 piloted by Flight Officer T.C. Kaluarachchi landed on the same LZ, but this time after an hour-long artillery preparation. As swell as evacuating casualties, the helicopter delivered a consignment of food, medicine and mortar shells.[12]

## Operation Trivida Balaya

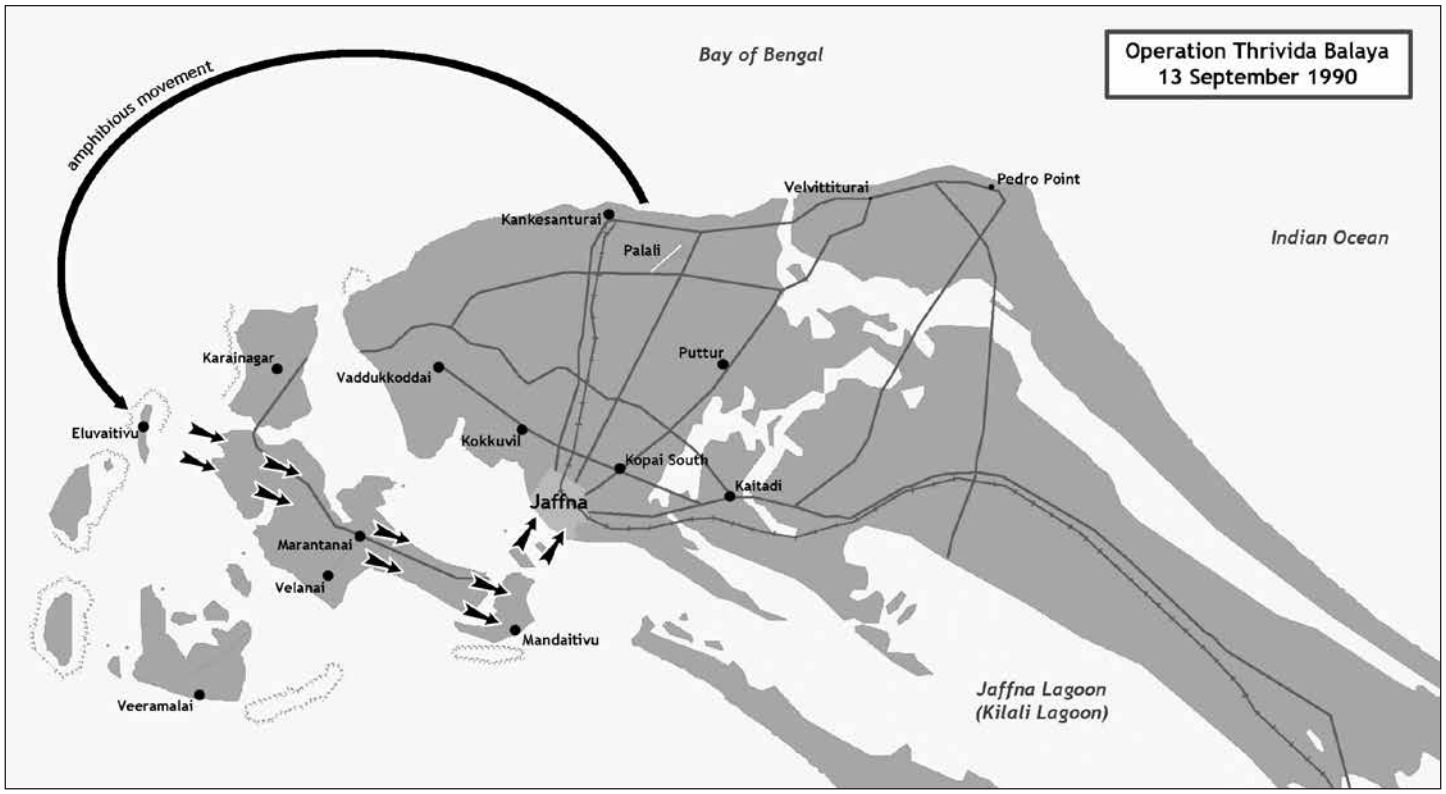
By early August, the besiegers, having grown tired of waiting, summoned the garrison to surrender. When the defenders refused, the LTTE launched two night attacks against the fort on 3 and 5 August, during which their fighters carried ladders to climb over the walls. On 5 August, a female unit also attempted a suicidal assault against the fort's main gate, losing four KIA in the process. The attacks were repulsed with heavy losses, due in part to intensive SLAF air strikes. On 3 August, the aircraft bombed and strafed the surroundings of the fort continuously from 1800 hours until midnight. Nevertheless, it was by now obvious that only a major operation could save the garrison.[13]

Both the government and the SLA high command agreed that losing the garrison would be a major symbolic blow. Hence, in August, Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa decided to initiate a major three-phased offensive, codenamed Operation Trivida Balaya, not only to rescue the garrison, but also to turn the strategic table on the LTTE.[14] During Phase I, the army was to break the siege of Karainagar naval base and capture the islands of Kayts and Mandaitivu. Phase II would involve government forces crossing the lagoon separating Mandaitivu from Jaffna town and linking up with the garrison, while in Phase III, the SLA infantry would expand from the bridgehead and recapture the town centre, thereby seizing the LTTE's *de facto* capital.

The operation implied a major SLN involvement too, its two LCM (landing craft mechanised) had to make dozens of voyages between Trincomalee and Palali to carry the troops and the massive amount of supplies necessary to support them in Palali, which was the launch pad for the whole enterprise. To complicate things further, Kankesanturai harbour near Palali was well within the range of LTTE mortars, which forced the navy to construct a 150-metre-long pier in Palali to enable the LCMs to unload.

The SLA eventually concentrated four infantry battalions, each reinforced by an engineer troop and an artillery troop equipped with either 120mm mortars or 76mm and 25-pounder guns. Three Saladin armoured vehicle troops were also provided by the Armoured Corps. These were placed under the control of Task Force 9, led by Colonel Anton Wijendra.[15]

Operation Trivida Balaya was initiated on 22 August. Once delivered to the Karainagar naval base, the 1st Sinha attacked a line of LTTE bunkers protecting the Ceynor Jetty Fisheries. Meanwhile, C Company of the 4th Gajaba had landed at night south of Kayts Junction: supported by naval fire from the gunboats SLNS *Ranakamee* and *Sooraya*, as well as the FAC (fast attack craft) *P463*, the company seized the junction, securing a firm foothold where it was reinforced by the 1st Gajaba Battalion. The landing wrong-footed the LTTE and




A map depicting the concept of Operation Trivida Balaya. (Map by Tom Cooper)

**Table 8: SLA Order of Battle, Operation Trivida Balaya, 13 September 1990**

| Unit | Commander | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| 2nd Division SLA | Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa | |
| Task Force 9 | Colonel Anton Wijendra | |
| 1st Sinha Task Force | Lieutenant Colonel Gotabhaya Rajapaksa | 1st Sinha, 1 troop 76mm guns, 1 troop engineers |
| 4th Gajaba Task Force | | 4th Gajaba, 1 troop 25-pdrs, 1 troop engineers |
| 1st Vijayabahu Task Force | | 1st Vijayabahu, 1 troop 120mm mortars, 1 troop engineers |
| 1st Special Forces Regiment | | |

went largely unopposed. Thereafter, both the 1st Sinha and 1st Gajaba continued their advances and had successfully cleared the whole island by the end of the day. Next came Mandaitivu, which was cleared by 27 August to complete the first phase of the operation with limited losses, although a dramatic case of 'blue on blue' occurred when a SF.260TP dropped its bombs on an SLA-held bunker, killing four soldiers from the 1st Gajaba. The SLN than inducted the rest of the task force on Kayts Island.[16]

## Sea Breeze

The LTTE was taken aback by the sudden appearance of the SLA on the islands facing Jaffna, but this did not prevent its Vanni commander from massing a large contingent of fighters, supported by a section of the Pasilan Mortar Unit, in Mullaitivu. During the last week of August, these forces not only plastered the army base located on the outskirts of the town with heavy shelling, but also launched a large-scale attack against it. Although the 63-strong garrison held its position and the assault was repelled, almost half the defenders were wounded, and only a large-scale rescue operation could avoid a repeat of the Kokkavil disaster.

Hence, a rescue force was hastily put together in Trincomalee. The LCMs SLNS *Pabbatha* and SLNS *Kandula*, escorted by the FGBs (fast gun boats) SLNS *Sooraya* and SLNS *Weeraya*, weighed anchor early on 1 September and arrived off Mullaitivu a few hours later, initiating Operation Sea Breeze. The two LCMs carried the 4th SLLI and the bulk of the 1st Special Forces Regiment. Meanwhile, two SLAF helicopters carried a detachment from the Special Forces to secure the beach selected for the amphibious landing, around 5km north of Mullaitivu. The landing operation went flawlessly, as recalled by Lieutenant Commander U. Lanka Prasada, the skipper of SLNS *Pabbatha*:

> The landing of troops and vehicles took place at dawn on Sept. 1, 1990 and it was a simultaneous landing by sea and air. SLNS '*Pabbatha*' and SLNS '*Kandula*' beached at a location 3 nautical miles north of Mullaitivu Light to commence the operation while Fast Gun Boats '*Sooraya*' and '*Weeraya*' provided naval gunfire support for the landing. '*Pabbatha*' landed 300 troops, two South African-built trucks, one SUV mounted with RCL [recoilless gun] and two tons of ammunition. The success of the operation heavily depended on the LCM landing in this unsecured territory held by LTTE, as artillery guns, mortar launchers and [the] majority of troops were on-board LCMs. After the initial landing, SLA troops secured the beach front and LCMs continued to land more troops, vehicles and equipment to facilitate the advance towards the besieged camp. Subsequently the SLA reached the camp and rescued [the] troops under siege and evacuated the wounded soldiers.[17]

A Buffel MRAP of the SLA with Commandos of the SLA 1st Special Forces Regiment in the Mullaitivu area in September 1990. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Supported by the two Buffel MRAPs, the task force – commanded by Brigadier Janaka Perera – began a deliberate advance toward Mullaitivu, which it reached on 2 September almost unimpeded, as the Tigers fought only delaying actions. By the morning of 3 September, the two battalions had cleared the locality and linked up with the beleaguered camp. The next three days were spent in clearing the adjacent areas and expanding the camp's perimeter. Operation Sea Breeze thereby ended in a victory won at the price of just eight soldiers KIA and another 40 WIA, while the army claimed to have killed 85 LTTE militants. The SLA decided to keep a strong foothold in Mullaitivu because of its strategic location and because its access to the sea made it much easier to sustain than bases on the mainland. After the string of operations in July and August, only the Mankulam camp remained isolated in the heart of the Vanni.[18]

## Suicide express

However, by forcing the SLA to relieve Mullaitivu, the LTTE received an opportunity to deliver a decisive blow. The redeployment of Perera's task force had created a logistical bottleneck, slowing down preparations for the second phase of Operation Trivida Balaya, in turn buying time for the LTTE to rush reinforcements to Jaffna and consolidate its positions in the city centre. With this, the insurgency was in a much better shape to oppose any large-scale attack from Mandaitivu.

By 12 September, the SLA had completed its build-up on Mandaitivu, assembled a total of 28 boats crewed by 65 officers and sailors to carry the spearheads of the 1st Sinha and the 1st Gajaba over the lagoon. The rest of the two units and the 4th Gajaba were to follow in similar fashion, while all their support weapons were pooled together on the northern side of the Mandaitivu. The SLAF was to provide air support.

The crossing began at 0530 hours on 13 September but was fraught with difficulties. Shallow waters prevented the SLA from deploying its boats directly on the beach, as planned: instead, the infantrymen had to wade the first 50 metres before boarding. Even worse, the boats had to zig-zag while crossing the lagoon, which was full of obstacles, and then the process had to be repeated on the coast at Jaffna. All of this had to be undertaken under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. Shantha Dissanayake, one of the platoon leaders of A Company, 1st Gajaba, gave a vivid testimony of the ordeal the soldiers and sailors went through that morning:

> The operation got underway in the early hours of Sept. 13, 1990. I joined the first wave […] Some of my men were hit during the crossing [… The] SLN operated boats under extremely difficult conditions. Some boats were struck in the mud. In some instances, we had to drag boats and wade 100 meters through the mud to reach the banks of the lagoon. In spite of heavy enemy fire, troops crossed the lagoon and entered Fort Jaffna with the help of ropes dangling from the ramparts – all the time under LTTE fire […] We never had tried a similar assault before. It was nothing but suicidal, but officers and men went ahead with the operation. Those fighting under us shielded us at the risk of their lives.[19]

## Forlorn hope

The first wave of the assault suffered dozens of casualties – up to 25 percent of officers and other ranks involved were killed or wounded, and nearly half of the boats were damaged by enemy fire – but they still managed to link-up with the fort and then establish a small bridgehead, enabling Kobbekaduwa to launch the second phase and prepare the third phase of Operation Trivida Balaya.[20] The troops that arrived in the second wave were supposed to widen the perimeter of the fort, but the ditch and the bare no-man's-land surrounding it proved an insurmountable obstacle. The first platoon of the 1st Gajaba that attempted this was almost annihilated in a matter of minutes, while the second was badly mauled; the 1st Sinha, which attempted to progress towards the main police station, was also stopped cold. To make matters worse, the Tigers' machine guns also hit the SF.260TP registered as CT-121 while it was making a low-level strafing run – the aircraft crashed in Jaffna lagoon, killing its pilot, Flight Officer P. Abeyweeragunawardena. Shocked by the loss, the SLAF drastically reduced the tempo of its operations, at the very moment that close air support would have been crucial for the advance of the ground forces.

In an almost desperate situation, a last bid was made to break out by 12 volunteers, led by 2nd Lieutenant Ranjan Lamahewage, on board a single Unicorn MRAP found inside the fort. Words do little justice in describing the drama that unfolded. As the Unicorn dashed at full speed towards the LTTE's lines, a lucky shot from the insurgents wounded the driver, who lost control and the vehicle crashed with full force against one of the LTTE bunkers. Fortunately for the dazed SLA troops inside the Unicorn, the crash caused the Tigers to flee, giving them a few seconds of breathing space to reorganise themselves and seize a small portion of the insurgent front line before the LTTE could react and tie them down with heavy fire. The Tigers remained in possession of enough other bunkers and emplacements to retain

fire-control over no-man's-land, making it impossible to reinforce the small 'Forlorn Hope' force, which began losing its troops one after the other. The SLA soldiers waited for nightfall, when the survivors managed to return to the fort. By then, only four were uninjured: all others were killed or wounded.

The SLA's offensive of 13 September thus ended in a stalemate: the army not only lost 30 KIA that day,[21] but was forced into the conclusion that Phase III of Operation Trivida Balaya was outside its reach – if only because supplies had to be manhandled across Jaffna lagoon by night. Therefore, a decision was taken to evacuate all the SLA troops from Jaffna. The withdrawal began on 17 September. Slow to realise their enemy had slipped away, the Tigers did not enter the fort and raise their flag over it until 26 September, bringing the 107-day siege to a conclusion.[22]

## Operation Jayashakthi

Once Jaffna was evacuated, the SLA also withdrew from the islands of Mandaitivu and Kayts to concentrate its troops in Palali before launching a new offensive. The SLA's lack of infantry was beginning to tell, with the same battalions being engaged through one offensive after the other. Palali remained by far the main hub for security forces in the Jaffna Peninsula, and this crucial foothold was anything but secured. On the contrary, the main base perimeter was small enough to allow the LTTE to constantly mortar the air base, while it was also cut off from an army camp in Kankesanturai, where the harbour was also under LTTE control. Because of this, the logistical cordon linking Palali to the outside world remained fragile, relying on the SLAF air-bridge and a single jetty which allowed only a limited amount of supplies to be unloaded at the same time by navy ships.

After a series of intensive air strikes, 21st Brigade under Brigadier Jaliya Nammuni began a series of thrusts out of the Palali perimeter on 17 October within the frame of Operation Jayashakthi. The 3rd SLLI, 4th Sinha, and the 4th and 6th Gajaba – well-supported by engineers and both land and naval artillery – attacked the LTTE line of bunkers and trenches around the base. Once a breakthrough was achieved, they advanced on Kankesanturai. During the five following days, the SLA infantry overcame several enemy strongpoints, all the while supported by barrel-bombing from SLAF Y-8s and Y-12s. Ultimately, the army managed to secure not only the town, but also the harbour. Meanwhile, other infantry formations expanded the Palali perimeter until the runway was out of reach of the LTTE mortars. Thus, by 22 October, the operation ended in a major success: the Palali forward defence line now encircled a beachhead of roughly 40 square kilometres – around 10 percent of the Jaffna Peninsula landmass. More importantly, casualties were low, considering the circumstances: the SLA lost only 24 troops KIA, while claiming to have killed more than 140 insurgents.[23]

## Operation Rana Derana

Nevertheless, there was to be no respite. Only two weeks later, the 3rd SLLI and the 6th Gajaba were mobilised for Operation Rana Derana, which envisaged an advance by a force commanded by Brigadier Siri Peiris to retake Mannar island.

At dawn on 4 November, the 4th Vijayaba sallied out of Thallady camp, in the vicinity of the causeway linking the island to Sri Lanka, and advanced straight to the town of Mannar. Meanwhile, six Bell 212s and 412s dropped in several rotations the bulk of the 6th Gajaba at Talvupadu, on the western coast of Mannar. Once the infantry battalion had secured a beachhead, an SLN task force – including the LCM SLNS *Kandula*, carrying the 3rd SLLI, escorted by the gunboat SLNS *Ranakamee*, the FAC *P467* and the IPC (inshore patrol craft) *P203* – arrived. The LCM beached without hindrance, disgorging two battalions that advanced inland. The town of Mannar was in government hands by the same evening, while the whole island was secured by 8 November. The LTTE Mannar district commander had kept only a limited number of fighters on the island, and these avoided any engagement with the SLA, retreating by sea instead. This proved the only failure of an otherwise flawless operation: the SLN task force failed to blockade the island and thus intercept the withdrawing enemy troops.[24]

## The Mankulam problem

In central northern Sri Lanka, the SLA garrison of Mankulam was reinforced in July 1990, and then launched a number of attacks to expand its perimeter. Eventually, the camp included an area about 1,500 metres long and 1,000 metres wide, the southern part of which included several buildings – including a church, a Buddhist temple, the local police station, a bank and the post office. A part of the defensive perimeter ran along the local branch of the railway line and included multiple bunkers and firing positions. The vegetation in front of these was cut down to enable a free field of fire, except for a segment facing thick jungle. Another part of the perimeter controlled

One of the SLAF's Y-8s (registration CR871), rolling for the next sortie. Although acquired from civilian sources in China, and wearing civilian livery, the type was also deployed intensively for combat operations – including barrel-bombing attacks on LTTE positions. (SLAF)

a crucial section of the A9 road, connecting Jaffna with Kandy. The garrison was composed of some 450 officers and other ranks, including the A, D and Support Companies of the 3rd Gajaba Rifles (the Support Company included six 81mm mortars), and one volunteer company from the 5th (V) SLLI.

However, not only was the Mankulam garrison weakened when the bulk of the 3rd Gajaba Rifles was redeployed for operations in the Vavuniya area (to prevent the LTTE from concentrating for an attack on Mankulam), but also isolated. Before long, it found itself exposed to harassment by a small insurgent force, which regularly beat drums or played propaganda with help of loudspeakers. Much worse was the fact that the troops began suffering from lack of food because the insurgents had emplaced several HMGs around the camp, immensely complicating SLAF resupply efforts. Indeed, every attempt to land at least one Bell 212 or 412 in the camp soon required a massive effort, as the SLAF had to deploy at least a pair of SF.260TPs to make several firing passes in the minutes preceding any resupply helicopter's arrival. Furthermore, the latter had to be escorted by two Bell 212 gunships, which strafed the camp surroundings during the two or three minutes necessary for the transport to land, unload its cargo, load casualties and take off again. For good measure, the garrison also opened fire during these crucial minutes: however, its random firing at suspected enemy positions proved ineffective.

Wearing a helmet and a protective vest, this gunner of an SLAF Bell 412 was photographed while the helicopter was underway over typical terrain of northern Sri Lanka. While they played an important role in the fighting during the 1980s, the longer the war went on, the more dangerous and less effective operations by unarmoured Bell 412s became. (SLAF)

Hence, the SLAF had to rely on its Y-12s dropping gunny bags to keep the garrison supplied, but up to 60 percent of these fell outside the camp perimeter. The surrounded troops were soon left with no choice but to fire at the top of nearby coconut trees in no-man's-land by day – and then collect their 'harvest' by night. Living conditions became so harsh that several soldiers injured themselves so they could be evacuated. When the order was issued that casualties caused by 'weapons misfire' would no longer be evacuated, troops began committing suicide. By October, the suicide rate reached two cases per week.[25]

### Arduous preparations

Free from besieging Fort Jaffna, by early November 1990 the LTTE had decided to launch an all-out assault on Mankulam camp. The operation was assigned to Balraj, the commander of the Vanni region and already renowned as one of the insurgents' best leaders. Over the following weeks, hundreds of male and female fighters were brought together for the task, along with large amounts of weapons and supplies. The build-up took several weeks because the LTTE had to avoid numerous reconnaissance flights by the SLAF, which made any road traffic by day extremely risky, and by night still a dangerous proposition, as recalled by a group leader of the Pasilan Mortar Unit, then moving with a convoy of tractors toward Mankulam:

> I used a torch to send the signal, and all five tractors behind us were darkened. A helicopter cut across the moon in the sky. The pilot must have noticed the lights going off. He suddenly turned back and started to circle. Taking our weapons and other things, we crossed the road and ran. David Annai ordered us to take our positions. I turned on the walkie-talkie and went behind a tree with the *poorali* carrying the GPMG [general purpose machine gun].
>
> After a second run, the helicopter began to dip. The pilot started operating his .50 machine gun and bullets roared past. Some hit the ground and exploded […] Salam, who was standing behind a sand mound, ran for the tractor trailer. The helicopter started to pump it with five-inch artillery shells. Smoke rose from where the explosions came. The earth shook. Salam started the tractor trailer and pressed the accelerator. The helicopter descended upon the tractor trailer on the road. The pilot seemed to be thinking that it would be easy to fire at it from behind. I shouted orders and the GPMG began to spit fire. The enemy did not expect this. The helicopter immediately rose up, all the while firing .50 calibre shells.[26]

Although forcing the helicopter away, the Pasilan Mortar Unit lost one fighter KIA and two others wounded in this engagement.

Prior to their attack, the insurgents ran extensive reconnaissance of Mankulam camp, registering all the enemy firing positions – including the dummy ones – while preparing their own positions. The same source observed:

> The preparation for the Mankulam battle and other battles is exhausting, and can take days. Most of the work must be done at night. We have to set up machine-gun positions without the enemy noticing. The sandbags and wood must by carried by us staying low on the ground or even crawling on our knees. It is hard work. The next day we will be so stiff that we have trouble walking straight. Yet, we do it all again on the next day too. Our eyes will be heavy due to the lack of sleep, yet the enemy targets have to be located in daylight.[27]

This was an extremely dangerous job, especially as the government forces were well-aware of the LTTE build-up: their SIGINT had

identified an increase from three to 27 radio stations in the Mankulam area. By the morning of 20 November, the Tigers had not only built a large number of bunkers, trenches, depots and medical stations, but also a massive entrenchment a mere 500 metres from the camp to emplace their Pasilans.[28]

### Onslaught

The assault was launched at 2015 hours on 23 November, when the Pasilans opened up, lobbing as many shells as they could into the camp. Machine guns joined in soon after, targeting the bunkers: the barrage continued – unabated – almost until midnight, despite some counter-fire from the garrison, which had to carefully husband its meagre stock of mortar bombs. Thereafter, multiple infantry parties, including two female detachments, crawled through the no-man's-land, creating two major paths around the mines and through the barbed wire – all the time under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. While they managed to open two attack axes (one under Theepan and the other under Balraj), their casualties were heavy: the female detachment alone lost 16 KIA. An intensive infantry assault then forced the garrison to abandon large portions of the perimeter and withdraw to the secondary defence line, where it held firm until mid-morning on 24 November. While the Tigers stopped to catch their breath, the defenders assessed their own position: after expending some 40,000 rounds of ammunition, and losing 12 KIA, their ranks were badly shaken and stocks severely depleted. Desperate calls were made to the SLA Vanni HQ for reinforcements and resupply: they replied during the afternoon, ordering the garrison to wait for the evening, then break out and march to the nearest army camp – about 30km away through thick jungle.[29]

### Fall of Mankulam

At dusk, the defending soldiers had regrouped to the side of the camp adjacent to the jungle and destroyed what they could not carry with them – mortars included. After having cleared a path through their own minefields, they vacated the camp between 1700 and 1845 hours. Unknown to them, their route of withdrawal had been intentionally kept open by the Tigers, as the LTTE hoped to entice the garrison to withdraw instead of fighting to the last man during their next assault. Nevertheless, and rather incredibly, the assailants failed to detect the evacuation! On the contrary, Balraj, Theepan and other unit commanders were busy preparing for their next onslaught against the camp and had concluded that something more was needed. An armoured suicide truck had been prepared and emplaced near the camp, to be driven by Mapanapillai Arasaratnam (alias 'Borg'), an experienced fighter who knew the local area very well. At 2000 hours, the Tigers resumed their mortar barrage against the camp, despite intensive air strikes by the SLAF, which was now covering the withdrawal of the garrison. The barrage went on for several hours, until Borg drove his explosive-laden truck right into the camp and detonated it, opening the way for the infantry assault. The insurgents captured the entire camp within minutes – encountering no resistance at all.[30]

By early morning, the Tigers realised the enemy garrison had escaped, and dispatched several groups in hot pursuit. Although withdrawing, the 3rd Gajaba and 5th (V) SLLI successfully ambushed their pursuers on several occasions. Ultimately, the affair turned into a running battle as the SLA column came under repeated attacks on both its rear and flanks. Unsurprisingly, multiple elements became progressively scattered into small groups, each of which attempted to make good their own escape. By 30 November, several of these were extracted by SLAF helicopters, while the mass of stragglers managed to reach the government-controlled area in groups of three or four. Overall, the operation had devastated the battered garrison: the SLA subsequently admitted the loss of 32 KIA and 163 missing in action (MIA) between 23 and 30 November: almost half their original strength.

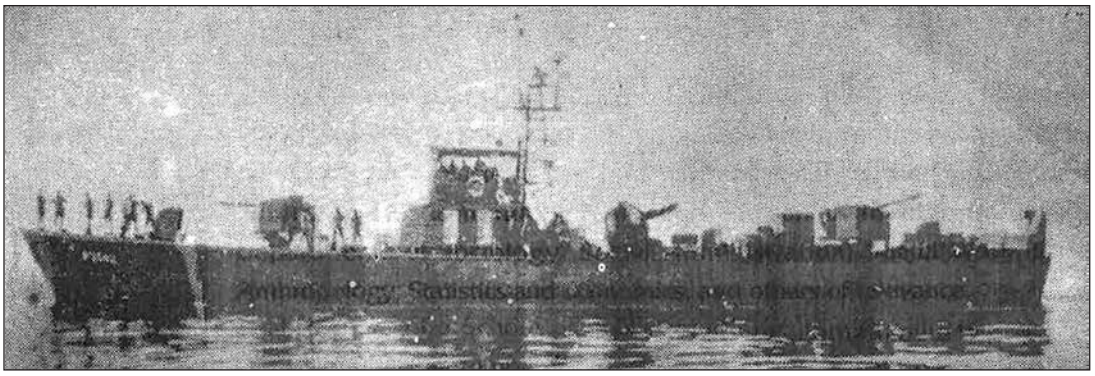
Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan armed forces managed to exact a measure of revenge: on 27 November, the SLAF received intelligence about the presence of a large LTTE rear-base in Kokkali which had been used as a launchpad for the Mankulam attack, and pounded it relentlessly for four hours.[31]

# 4
# AIR, SEA AND LAND

In the aftermath of the Mankulam debacle, the SLA shifted several units operating in the north to the eastern theatre, making it impossible for Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa to initiate any large-scale offensives in his area of command. However, it was only in March 1991 that the Tigers launched a major new attack, this time in the Mannar district with the intent of overwhelming the Silwathura army base. The base was located along the coast, west of Mannar island, and was defended by the bulk of the 6th Gajaba Battalion (CO Major Tissa Jayawardane), with 275 men. These were divided between the HQ, Support Company and B and C Infantry Companies, supported by three 120mm mortars, and a contingent of 25 barely trained Muslim home guards. The camp was well-protected, with one side covered by the sea, while the rest of the perimeter was surrounded by scrubland, offering clear fields of fire. However, it was a highly tempting target because the 6th Gajaba's two other companies were garrisoning the smaller Kokkupadayan (A Company) and Kondachchi (D Company) camps, located 5km and 15km away from Silwathura respectively. Hence, once one of the latter could be taken, the fate of the two other camps would be sealed. In turn, this would not only remove any protection for the Sinhalese and Muslim villages in these areas but would give the LTTE control over a crucial coastal zone, extremely well positioned to receive smuggled goods from southern India. Indeed, the Tigers had increased their pressure on the area: on 17 February 1991, two platoons of the 6th Gajaba were annihilated in an ambush at Kondachchi.[1]

### Onslaught on Silwathura

By mid-March, the Tigers had completed their preparations, massing large numbers of fighters and Pasilan mortars near Silwathura. The onslaught began on 19 March at 2015 hours when the usual Pasilan barrage began, while a less intensive diversionary bombardment also targeted the Kokkupadayan camp. At Silwathura, the 120mm mortar team opened up against the Pasilan positions but committed a blunder by exhausting the available stock of mortar shells in 15



A Chinese-made, Shanghai-II-class coastal patrol vessel, usually deployed as a gunboat by the SLN, as photographed by the LTTE in the early 1990s. (LTTE release)

minutes, thereafter being unable to provide counter-battery fire. The Tigers had also decided to launch a Black Tiger attack, positioning a large armoured truck filled with explosives around 200 metres from the enemy camp. Once the artillery barrage had lasted long enough to send most of the defenders into their trenches and bunkers to take cover, the driver, Kasipillai Thayaparan (alias 'Dumbo'), started the engine and the truck began to roll toward its target. However, soldiers had spotted the truck before it set off, allowing the B Company commander to pool all available RPGs and LMGs. A massive weight of fire targeted the suicide-truck as soon as it began to move, and eventually, several rounds ignited the massive charge 75 metres before the SLA positions, causing a huge explosion. The insurgents nonetheless launched an all-out and multi-pronged attack immediately after the detonation, engaging the garrison on all fronts except the coastal side, but were everywhere repulsed. Another five infantry attacks followed until dawn, but these failed to overwhelm the garrison.

## SLAF saves the day

Arguably, what saved the day – or rather the night – once again was an all-out SLAF effort. SF.260TPs and Bell 212 gunships operating from the Anuradhapura and Vavuniya bases flew constantly over the camp, scheduling their flights to make sure that at least one aircraft was always attacking the insurgents. The flight tempo was such that most aircrew logged four to five hours per day, and one particular Bell pilot logged a staggering 20 flight hours during one 24-hour period. However, as the night was pitch black, target identification was a major problem. This was initially overcome when the 6th Gajaba troops lit fires around these positions, but this was swiftly countered by the Tigers, who started scores of similar fires, making it impossible for the pilots to discern friendly and enemy positions. Unsurprisingly in such circumstances, one bomb dropped by a SF.260TP fell right on top of an SLA bunker, killing three soldiers.[2]

At dawn, and after their repeated failures to breach the camp's defensive perimeter, the Tiger commanders called off their attacks. However, the 6th Gajaba urgently needed to refill its ammunition stocks and had suffered numerous casualties. Consequently, a pair of Bell 212s was sent to resupply the troops and carry the injured on their return flight, while other aircraft were striking enemy positions, as recalled by Flight Officer Kapila Rathnaseka, a Bell pilot:

> At first light, while flying over Silavaturai, we saw the LTTE preparing to fire locally made 'baba' mortars. Subsequently, SIAI-Marchettis bombed the location. Having suffered heavy losses, the LTTE withdrew. During the battle, Bell 212s landed a short distance away from the main camp to evacuate the wounded.[3]

Indeed, the first Bell managed to land near the camp HQ in a hurry, unload the ammunition boxes and take casualties aboard before taking off. However, LTTE machine-gun fire hit the second helicopter while it was approaching the LZ, injuring Flight Lieutenant Sumangala Dias, forcing the aircraft to abort and fly back to base. Following the incident, the SLAF concluded that any further attempts to reach the camp would be inviting disaster, and supplies were instead dropped over the base in gunny bags by the ubiquitous Y-12s, with the usual results: roughly two-thirds of them fell behind enemy lines. In turn, this meant that casualties could no longer be evacuated, and the garrison commander had no other choice than to settle them under a tree near the centre of the camp. By sheer luck, not a single enemy mortar shell fell in this area during the siege.

The base also began to benefit from fire-support provided by the SLN Shanghai-class gunboats, but with mixed results: the 37mm shells fired by their main batteries were devastating enough, but these ships' lack of modern fire-control systems made their shore bombardments imprecise.[4]

## Rescue operation

Despite their setback, the Tigers remained determined to take the camp, and launched a new attack at 1830 hours on 20 March, beginning with a two-hour mortar barrage – even more intense than that of the previous evening. This was followed by several successive infantry assaults, lasting the entire night. It was during the last of these that the insurgents finally achieved a breakthrough, forcing the garrison to evacuate a part of their first line and withdraw to the second line. Although suffering from heavy losses, the insurgents had gradually worn down the defenders: after losing a third of their number either killed or wounded, by the morning of 21 March, the garrison only controlled an area roughly the size of two football fields.

After the first LTTE night attack, it had become obvious for the SLA Northern Command that only a large-scale rescue operation could prevent another disaster. Indeed, on 20 March, the 1st Sinha (CO Major Parakrama Pannipitiya) launched an advance from Mannar along the coastal road. However, multiple LTTE ambush parties had managed to stop its advance. Similarly, naval forces attempted to land a company of the 1st Vijayabahu in one of their LCMs right into the camp, but this had to be abandoned as the LTTE had several firing positions covering the beach.[5]

The SLA then came up with a different plan, which began at dawn on 21 March. In several high-speed flights, three Bell 212s redeployed the 1st Sinha and the 1st Gemunu Watch from Thalladi camp near Mannar island to the Kondachchi camp. The move wrong-footed the insurgents, who had not emplaced any HMGs around the camp and were thus unable to disturb the air-bridge. The two battalions then left Kondachchi and advanced toward the Kokkupadayan camp. However, it took them the whole day to cover the 10km separating the two places, small LTTE delaying parties proving highly successful in slowing their passage, making the most of the dense forests that covered the area. Crucially, the battalion's commanders decided not to risk a night advance and to wait for the following day to cover the final 5km to Silwathura.

The insurgents reacted with a last-ditch attempt to annihilate the 6th Gajaba in the embattled camp, whose shortage of manpower had grown so acute that Major Kamal Gunaratne, then in charge of the battalion, had no choice but to mobilise around 20 walking wounded to man the defensive positions. Once the sun had set, the Tigers launched a two-pronged infantry attack against the perimeter, but this failed again after an hour, triggering a further two-hour Pasilan barrage. Despite intensive fire-support provided by both the SLAF and SLN, which by then had the FGBs SLNS *Ranakamee* and *Sooraya* and a few other patrol craft cruising off Silwathura, the insurgents continued their assault throughout the night. Their last attempt was made at 0430 hours, and it was only when dawn arrived that the LTTE commanders finally gave up.

SNLS *Sooraya*, one of five Shanghai-II-class coastal patrol vessels of the SLN, travelling at speed. Note the front and rear turrets for twin 37mm automatic guns – a weapon that proved devastatingly effective in naval warfare off Sri Lankan coasts in the 1990s. (SLN)

At the same time, the 1st Sinha and 1st Gemunu Watch began to move from Kokkupadayan for the last leg of their journey to Silwathura. Once again, their advance proved very slow, as they only reached their destination at the end of the afternoon, thereby breaking the siege. While the Tigers had been badly bloodied by their repeated assaults against the camp, and thus did not try to oppose the advance of the relief column, they still managed to slow it down by adopting one of their classic tactics, positioning snipers in palmyra tree tops. These fighters, whose firing platforms consisted of chairs nailed against the trunks, benefited from excellent fields of fire while being extremely difficult to detect. While their casualty figures remain unknown, another recollection of Flight Officer Rathnaseka gives an idea of the extent of the insurgents' defeat:

> After the army re-established control over the area, the then senior officer in charge of operations in the Vanni region, Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa, flew to Silavaturai with several other senior officers. LTTE bodies were scattered all over the place. I have never seen so many LTTE bodies in one place […] The LTTE obviously suffered substantial losses, though it seemed to be in command, during the first 24 hours of the battle.[6]

The SLA subsequently reported to have recovered 116 bodies of enemy fighters on the battlefield, and retrieved 76 Type 56 rifles, 12 LMGs and three RPGs. However, the garrison had suffered 38 KIA and 128 WIA – roughly half its initial strength.[7]

## Victory in the Vanni

While the battle for Silwathura ended in a clear-cut SLA victory, it also enticed the High Command to shuffle several infantry battalions engaged in the east back to the north. Thus reinforced, Major General Kobbekaduwa lost no time in initiating several offensives, which were intended to last from early April to October 1991, intended to keep the LTTE wrong-footed. Indeed, Kobbekaduwa was a fervent advocate of the 'bullet cover is better than steel cover' motto; in other words, that attack was the best form of defence. By launching one offensive after the other, it was hoped that the LTTE would be forced to react, and thus deprived of the ability to concentrate enough forces to launch new large-scale attacks. Most subsequent SLA operations were designed to attract enemy fighters into the open and inflict casualties on them.[8]

The first such offensive came in the Mannar district. During the days that followed the relief of the Silwathura camp, the army prepared to flush the insurgents out of the greater part of Mannar district. The case for such an undertaking was made even stronger on 29 March 1991 when the Tigers ambushed a detachment of the 1st Gemunu Watch in a village in the vicinity of Silwathura, killing 25 soldiers.

Operation Tiger Chase began two days later, and involved no less than five infantry battalions – the 1st Sinha, 1st SLLI, 6th Gajaba, 1st Gemunu Watch and 4th Vijayabahu – supported by armour and artillery detachments, under the control of the 5th Brigade Group led by Brigadier Srilal Weerasooriya. Up to 22 April, these units seized – sometimes after heavy fighting – a string of LTTE-controlled localities inland, as well as several bases, including Veppankulam, Arippu, Nanathan, Manthai and Parappakadanthan, claiming to have inflicted heavy losses on the insurgents. However, the Tigers retained their ability to operate in strength in the district: on 29 April, they ambushed and annihilated two platoons of the 4th Vijayabahu moving from Nanattan to Talladi, killing 45 soldiers.[9]

While SLA troops were moving into the Mannar district within the frame of the Operation Tiger Chase, another crisis erupted, this time at the Karainagar naval base. Once the army had vacated the Kayts, Mandaithivu and Karaithivu islands in the aftermath of Operation Trivida Balaya, the Tigers had reoccupied them all and re-established a ring of positions surrounding the naval base. On 1 April, the Pasilan Mortar Unit fired around 50 bombs filled with either fragment or incendiary charges. However, the base was garrisoned not only by sailors, but also by the 5th Gemunu Watch, which reacted by launching a series of sallies the following day, triggering fierce firefights along the three lines of insurgent bunkers. By the end of 4 April, a total of 14 soldiers and sailors had been killed, and another 45 wounded. On the following day, the battalion finally broke through the first LTTE bunker line, and had recovered enough ground by 10 April to place the base outside of Pasilan range, forcing the Tigers to rely on random and imprecise 82mm mortar fire to continue to harass the camp.

Nonetheless, the SLA assessed that the LTTE was building up its forces to prepare for an all-out assault against Karainagar. They reacted by launching Operation High Tide, which began on 25 April, when SLNS *Pabbatha*, supported by the fast gunboats SLNS *Weeraya* and SLNS *Rakshaka*, landed the 4th Sinha and 4th Gajaba on the northern coast of Karaithivu, while the naval base's garrison initiated an advance of its own. However, the enemy resistance was weaker than expected, as recalled by a naval officer who arrived in Karainagar in the aftermath of the operation: "After the operation was completed we emerged from our base. We realized then that the LTTE attack had not itself been that bad. I am not sure it was much more than a few guys lobbing mortars at the base."[10]

The three SLA battalions thus not only swiftly cleared Karaithivu island, but also seized Kayt island the following day and thus retook control of the crucial Pannai causeway linking the latter to Jaffna – losing five KIA during these two days.[11]

The next Northern Command offensives came in the Vavuniya area. These were designed with a dual purpose, consisting of securing roadways while drawing the Tigers into battle and inflicting casualties upon them. Operation Vanni Wickrema I (Vanni Victory I), the first of these, involved two ad hoc brigades named 'Kanthaka' (CO Colonel Lohan Gunawardene) and 'Vikum' (CO Colonel Shantha Kottegoda), with two infantry battalions each. The Armoured Corps, engineers and artillery detachments supported the two brigades. Notably, it was the first time that Type-59-I 130mm long-range guns were used in battle. Between 2 and 14 May, the 3,000-man force operated along the A9 road north of Vavuniya. The two brigades seized Omanthai on 5 May, before going on to attack a series of LTTE camps hidden in the jungle, with the most important – known as 'Ramesh' and 'Yankee' – being captured on 9 and 11 May respectively. The LTTE fought mainly delaying actions as the bulk of its fighters simply melted away in the thick jungle to avoid the onslaught, although the army claimed to have killed 148 militants during the operation.[12]

Operation Vanni Wickrema II followed from 14 June, this time involving only the Vikum Brigade, but reinforced to four battalions. The SLAF mobilized a pair of SF.260TPs and two Bell 212 gunships for fire-support, while a single Bell was dedicated to CASEVAC duties. The brigade advanced westward from Vavuniya along the Vavuniya–Mannar road. This time, the advancing troops met with determined enemy resistance on 14 June around Puvarasankulam, a mere 20km from Vavuniya, and lost 14 KIA and another 20 wounded while seizing what turned out to be a major LTTE base. Thereafter, the brigade continued to advance, captured the Thirumanankulam crossroads on 20 June, and the offensive was ended two days later. During Vanni Wickrema II, the SLA succeeded in seizing a series of LTTE camps and temporarily secured a segment of the Vavuniya–Mannar road but lost 44 soldiers killed in the process.[13]

However, even this series of SLA offensives unleashed between April and June failed to tie down the bulk of the LTTE's forces. Furthermore, the area captured during the operations was almost all evacuated thereafter: this included Kayts and Mandaitivu islands after Operation High Tide and large areas of Mannar district after Operation Tiger Chase.

## Cornered lions

By mid-1991, the Tigers had managed to mass a force of previously unheard-of size in an attempt to land a decisive blow, triggering the largest battle since the beginning of the conflict. The LTTE high command had decided to take the crucial Elephant Pass camp. The importance of the location could not be overemphasised, as the pass included the only road connection of the Jaffna Peninsula with the mainland, thus cutting the LTTE-controlled areas in two. For the same reason, holding it was equally crucial for the government. The local geography was specific, as the whole area is extremely dry, with the ground being only a few feet above sea level. The ground was sandy and barren of trees, with any vegetation consisting mostly of bush: while often thick, the areas covered by it were frequently separated by vast open spaces. In other words, this was ideal ambush territory, offering plenty of 'killing fields' for any military force trying to mount an offensive operation.

The SLA camp at the Elephant Pass had been surrounded by the Tigers since the beginning of Eelam War II, and was far away from other security forces. The garrison consisted of just a single battalion, the 6th Sinha (CO Major Sanath Karunaratne), which had to cover a front line of 5km long and 3.5km deep. Moreover, the garrison was split into two bridgeheads, connected by a causeway crossing the pass: on the northern side of the pass were a few buildings, while the southern side included a guest house that was a part of the nearby salt fields complex. Because of the low-level waters of the Kilali lagoon, it was not possible to sustain the garrison by sea, making it completely dependent on the air force for survival. However, the air bridge was complicated immensely by the insurgents' HMGs. The situation became even worse for the defenders on 22 April, when two 81mm mortar shells exploded near the base helipad while a helicopter was landing – prompting the SLAF to refuse to operate under such conditions and triggering a chain of events that significantly undermined the position of the 6th Sinha.

Indeed, the unit was ordered to launch an offensive of its own, codenamed Operation King Prawn, to expand its defensive perimeter and thus protect the LZ from mortar fire. The operation began on 27 April, with the infantrymen successfully securing the intended area, but at an unexpectedly heavy price as it turned out to be defended in strength by the LTTE: the battalion lost 28 KIA and 64 WIA in just one day. To the shock of Major Karunaratne, and because of the SLA's structural manpower shortages, the reinforcements promised to cover both the casualties' replacement and the holding of the newly conquered area never came, and only the troops returning from leave or recovered wounded were shuttled back to the camp. To add salt to the injury, the garrison had no option but to withdraw from the area captured on 27 April, with the whole episode ending in it losing a company's worth of troops for nothing. Fortunately for the diminished battalion, it had ample time to build strong defensive lines, covered with minefields and barbed wire, and having clear fields of fire.

Obviously, the LZ inside the bridgehead remained as vulnerable as before, and the SLAF was quick in limiting its resupply efforts to one helicopter flight every five days – each of which had to be escorted by attack aircraft to suppress the insurgents. Of course, this was insufficient to cover the needs of an infantry battalion, especially as drinkable water also had to be provided. Thus, SLAF aircraft began dropping iceboxes and food containers in the lagoon's shallow waters, where they had to be recovered by the troops.[14]

## The mother of all battles[15]

During June 1991, the Sri Lankan intelligence services collected ever more indications confirming a huge insurgent build-up in the Elephant Pass area. Indeed, the Tigers were in the process of massing there no less than 3,000 out of their roughly 7,000 combatants. These included about 500 female fighters, and were divided into two main forces: the Northern, led by Bhanu (the Jaffna military commander); and the Southern, led by Balraj, and including the Charles Anthony Padai Ani.

A column of two squads of female LTTE combatants passing a farmer working his field in the Vanni area. Note the relatively consistent appearance of the insurgents, including their uniforms, Chinese-made versions of the AKM and at least two machine gunners. (LTTE release)

Hundreds of civilians were also mobilised to dig a series of trenches around the camp, which was thus surrounded by double lines of circumvallation. The first, sometimes located 200 metres from enemy lines, acted as a forward defence line and harboured observation posts, while the second line was the main defence line. It included many bunkers, some of which were reinforced with rails or concrete. Most of these were buried under trees to keep them invisible from the air, while at the same time, less camouflaged dummy positions or weapons such as Pasilan mortars were built to attract SLAF strike aircraft. A network of communication trenches connected the first and second lines of defence with the rear areas, while a number of fire emplacements for mortars or heavy machine guns were also prepared.

The insurgents stockpiled large amounts of supplies (including dozens of coffins for their fatalities), preparing themselves for a protracted siege if needed. They also inducted the newly created Radha unit, which, aside from the usual 12.7mm HMGs, had two much more potent ZPU-2 14.5mm HMGs in its inventory, which were to be deployed in battle for the first time. Furthermore, lessons had obviously been drawn from the Silawaturai defeat. Instead of relying on truck based VBIED to smash through the enemy lines, the Tigers adopted a concept inaugurated by other militant groups during the 1980s: makeshift tanks. A few bulldozers were up-armoured with steel plates in the movement's workshops, while a layer of metal net was also added to provide some protection against RPG rounds. Several dozen tractors were also armoured, but in a less comprehensive fashion, with the armour plates being concentrated on the front of the vehicles to protect the engine and driver. In turn, the armoured bulldozers were to be used as mobile shelters, allowing the infantry to follow in their wake across the enemy fields of fire. Eventually, by early July, the Tigers had completed their preparations for Operation Tharai Kadal Aahayam (Land Sea Air), the name they gave their offensive.[16]

## First attempt

The first LTTE assault on the Elephant Pass came in the early morning of 10 July, but turned out to only be a probing attack supported by a heavy Pasilan and mortar bombardment, which ceased altogether at sunrise, just an hour after it began. The 6th Sinha had 13 troops wounded in action. Thereafter, and until the evening, the Tigers kept the garrison under harassing mortar fire, preparing for the decisive onslaught. This began at 2230 hours with an intensive mortar barrage, followed by a major thrust from Balraj's forces against the southern defence line. The insurgents there advanced in columns behind the armoured bulldozers, as described by Gena, one of the female fighters involved in the attack:

> Our objective was, during this first phase of the operation, to capture the outlying Guest House army camp, a short distance from the main army camp base situated in the centre of the vast military complex. The Guest House camp itself was well fortified surrounded by sentry points, mine-fields, barbed-wire fencing and open space […] Our women fighters were in three groups with each group allocated a sentry point to capture. We were to advance under the cover of a camouflaged bulldozer. The noise of the vehicle alerted the army. Heavy fighting broke out. Bomber aircraft and helicopter gunships provided support to the troops under attack. Amid heavy aerial bombardment and machine-gun fire from the army, our women fighting units continued with their advance, crawling towards the sentry points. The forward group of women fighters cleared the mines as they moved, creating a pathway for the cadres behind. When they reached the perimeters of the sentry points they cut through the barbed wire and attacked the army positions […] the soldiers attached to protect the Guest House army camp fled […] We occupied the Guest House camp. Eleven women fighters, including one group leader, Lieutenant Vahini, were killed in this phase of the operation and 24 women cadres were injured.[17]

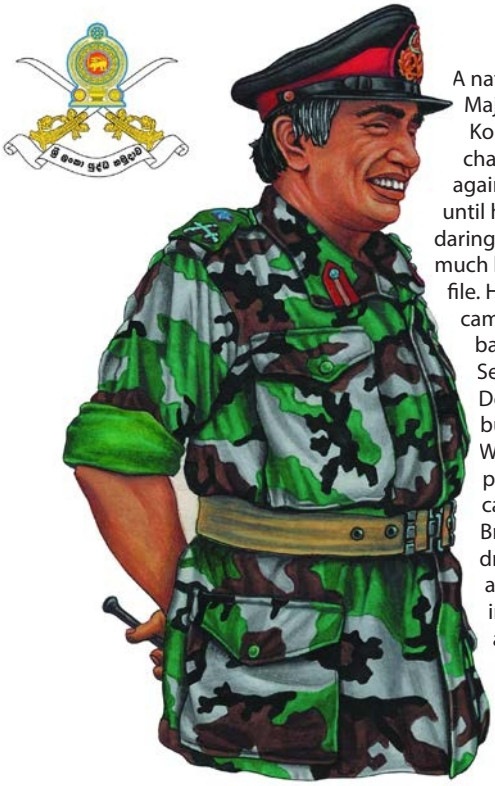
## Death of a corporal

The SLA company that defended this sector successfully knocked out one bulldozer with its RPGs, but was nonetheless threatened with being overwhelmed, and thus forced to fall back on the second defensive line. Content to have reached their first day objective, the LTTE did not pursue its assault further that night. The next day, 11 July, was very much a repetition of the previous one, with the camp kept under harassment mortar fire. Once evening came, the Tigers attacked again, but this time their main effort fell on the northern flank. The Bhanu command, however, proved less successful than Balraj's, as the militants failed to breach the forward defence line and had to call off their attack at 2300 hours, after having lost several armoured tractors. Apparently, the LTTE commanders were wrong-footed by this failure, as the next major assault did not come until two days later, on the evening of 13 July, and in the south. Once again, insurgent columns followed in the tracks of armoured vehicles, intending to smash the 6th Sinha's defensive line. The turning point of the battle came when one of the makeshift tanks managed to almost breach the line, moving past a building. One of the SLA's NCOs, Corporal Gamini Kularatna, made the most of the fleeing opportunity by sallying out of his position and climbing on the roof of the bulldozer to attack it from above: he threw a pair of grenades inside it, killing the driver and stopping the vehicle. The accompanying militants killed Kularatna

Between 1982 and 1988, the SLN acquired a total of 12 Dvora-Mk.I-class fast patrol craft from Israel. These received the hull numbers *P453 – P458* and *P463 – P468* and were all assigned to the 4th Fast Attack Flotilla. Each was armed with two 20mm Oerlikon guns (one fore, another aft), and two 12.7mm Browning heavy machine guns (usually installed directly behind the bridge). The vessels of the Dvora Mk.I-class were 21.8 metres long, displaced 45 tonnes fully loaded and were powered by two diesel engines, giving them a maximum speed of 37 knots (69km/h). Due to their relatively short range (about 1,040km/560nm), their operations off the northern coast of Sri Lanka usually required the support of heavier vessels, which served as 'motherships' and for command and control purposes. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

The Type-062 or Shanghai-II-class was originally designed as a coastal anti-submarine-warfare patrol craft and was widely built and exported. Only 39 metres long, it displaced 135 tonnes, and had a crew of 36. Powered by two 1,200hp (679kW) diesel engines, it could reach speeds of 28.5 knots, and was armed with two twin 37mm Type 61 automatic guns (larger turrets) and two Type-61 25mm guns (smaller turret). Through the 1990–95 period, the SLN operated a total of 10 vessels of this class, named *Jagatha*, *Ranakamee*, *Rakshaka*, *Sooraya*, *Weeraya*, *Dakshava*, *Balwatha*, *Jagatha*, *Ranasuru*, *Ranawiru and Ranarisi* – all of which were assigned to the 3rd Fast Gun-Boat Squadron. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

An infantryman of the SLA during the times of the Jaffna battles in December 1995. He is shown wearing simple two-piece green fatigues and conventional leather boots, along with a modern Orlite OR-201 kevlar helmet with green cover and fabric strips to help break up its outline. He is equipped with an Israeli-made 'commando load-carrying system', consisting of a pair of wide suspenders, supporting sets of four pouches differing in size (plus a single large rear central pouch). Pieces of yellow foam were added on the sides of the abdomen for improved comfort. His personal weapon is the Chinese version of the 7.62x39mm AKMS assault rifle, equipped with a folding metal shoulder stock instead of the more-common fixed wooden stock. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



A national hero in Sri Lanka, Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa was in charge of major operations against the LTTE from 1990 until his death, and proved a daring and skilled commander, much loved by the rank and file. He is shown wearing a camouflage uniform clearly based on the British Second World War-era Denison Smock design but in the US Army Woodland camouflage pattern of the 1980s. His canvas belt is also of British design, as are his dress cap, collar patches and shoulder rank insignia – all of which are almost identical to those of the British Army. Inset is the crest of the SLA. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

Starting in 1990, the LTTE introduced its distinctive combat uniforms with a 'tiger-stripe' pattern. The cotton fabric for these was imported from Norway, while the uniform was cut and sewn in Sri Lanka. LTTE veterans recall the uniform as being light and comfortable to wear. Its variants included a blue uniform for the Sea Black Tigers and a black-on-grey pattern for the Black Tiger suicide squadron. Note the canvas jungle boots and the ubiquitous 'ChiCom' pouch right around the female fighter's body. The female Tamil Tigers were required to either cut their hair or wear it tightly braided, because long hair was regarded as a 'handicap' in combat. Her firearm is a Norinco Type-81 assault rifle using 7.62x39mm cartridges, with foldable buttstock – essentially a selective fire, gas-operated Chinese variant of the Soviet-made Kalashnikov. Inset is the crest of the Tigers. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

At the start of Eelam War II, the British-made Saladin armoured cars were still the most potent combat vehicles of the SLA's Armoured Corps. While their lack of cross-country mobility began proving a major hindrance, making the introduction of MBTs unavoidable, a batch of six Saladins was acquired as late as January 1993, and they were withdrawn from service only in 2001. Most of them received various forms of disruptive camouflage pattern applied over their original dark green overall livery. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

The Buffel – an armoured personnel carrier of South African design and manufacture – was the first mass-produced V-shaped hull, open-topped, mine-protected vehicle (MPV). It was based on the chassis of the popular Mercedes-Benz Unimog S-truck. The resulting 4x4 vehicle (powered by a 125hp engine) had a driver's cab on the left front (with three rectangular, bullet-resistant glass windows), and an open-topped combat compartment for up to 12 troops. It required little maintenance and proved highly popular in service with the SLA for its good mobility and excellent mine-survival capability (both crucial assets when facing insurgents renowned for their mastery in mine-warfare), where it was nicknamed the Unicorn. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

Like in South Africa, many of the SLA's Buffels were modified through the installation of a twin 7.62mm machine gun for the section leader high on the front right side of the combat compartment, along with a storage box for ammunition. A large storage box was installed at the rear: its top was for the driver's use, while the rest was for extra kit and spares needed by passengers. The top outside armour plates of the combat compartment could be folded down for easier debussing. Over time, the original dark green colour of the SLA's Unicorns was frequently 'enhanced' by disruptive camouflage patterns – mostly applied in sand or light green. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

In 1991, the Sri Lankan Army acquired its first main battle tanks in the form of 25 T-55s (and VT-55A ARVs) from Czechoslovakia. These were all second-hand vehicles from the surplus stocks of the Czechoslovak Army, were thus painted in dark green overall, and entered service with the newly established 4th SLAC. Although outdated for a major conflict, they proved rugged and reliable, and were mostly deployed in an assault role as support for the infantry and therefore, they were rarely deployed in formations larger than squadrons. One of the first locally applied modifications was the addition of large side-skirts, made of hard rubber, which were unique to the SLA in their shape and form. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

In 1991, the SLA re-equipped two squadrons of the 3rd SLAC with 24 Type-85 (YW 531) infantry fighting vehicles, replacing its worn-out British-made armoured vehicles, all of which were concentrated within the 1st SLAC. SLA Type-85s are known to have included one command vehicle variant – armed with a single 12.7mm heavy machine gun installed in an open-topped turret, as shown here – five ARVs and 18 IFVs. The disruptive camouflage pattern of all 24 Type-85s consisted of sand, dark green and black. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

The 18 Type-85 (YW 309) IFVs acquired by the SLA all mounted a Chinese copy of the turret of the Soviet-made BMP-1 IFV, as shown here. This had a 73mm smooth bore, low-pressure gun (firing similar ammunition to the RPG-7) and a 7.62mm PKT machine gun. While classified as light tanks and designated 'T-85' by the Sri Lankans, they proved a disappointment in service: they were too lightly armoured, difficult to maintain and lacking technical documentation in English. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

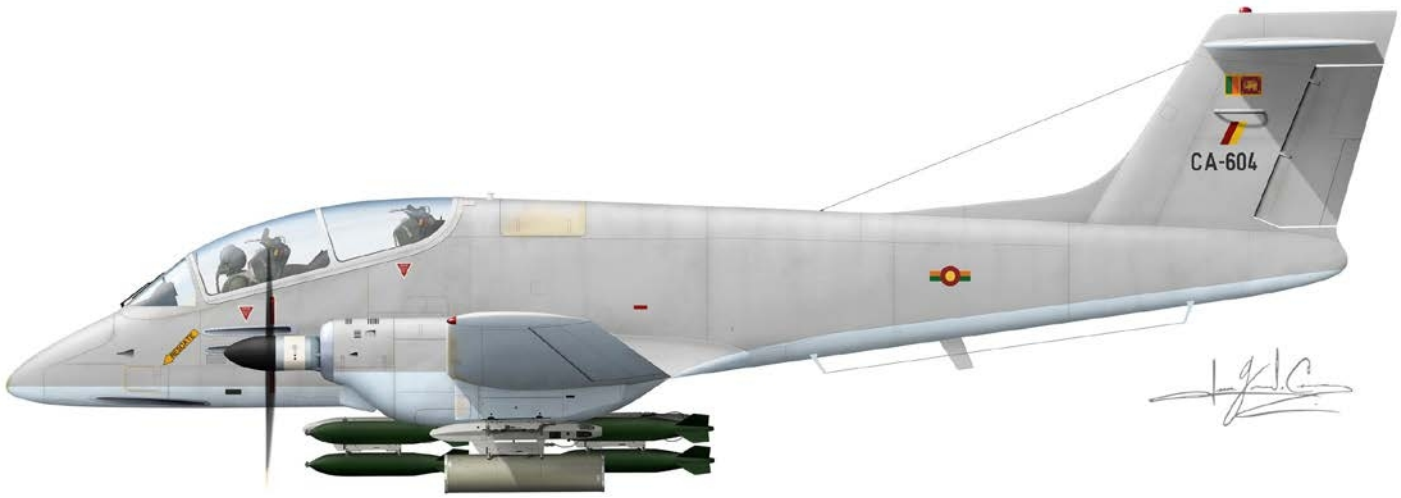
By 1992, surviving T-55s of the 4th SLAC began receiving 'cages': baskets installed on the sides and rear of their turrets, with the aim of detonating incoming shaped-charge ammunition, like that of RPG-7s. This in turn prompted many foreign observers to reach the wrong conclusion that the SLA had acquired Chinese-made Type-69 tanks – known to have had such baskets installed series-wise since the 1980s. Crews of the 4th SLAC found the baskets handy to store various bits of gear, ammunition, spares and personal belongings. Later, individual vehicle numbers were added atop of them. As far as is known, all T-55s retained their dark green overall livery throughout the 1990s. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

In 1992, Sri Lanka acquired 12 Chinese-built wheeled APCs. These were referred to by the Sri Lanka Army as the Type-86, or T-86, though the Chinese referred to these as the Type 90 or by the industrial designation WZ 551. All were assigned to the 3rd Squadron of the 3rd SLAC (the other two were still equipped with Type-85s). Although armed with a 12.7mm heavy machine gun in an open-topped turret, they proved underpowered for cross-country movement: thus, their procurement was stopped. As far as is known, all were painted in green overall. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

Realising they required a 'true' IFV, the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps placed an order for 16 BMP-1s and BMP-2s with Ukraine in 1994. Including a handful of MVLT and ARV variants, these entered service with the newly established 5th SLAC by the end of the year. Better armoured and having a better ballistic shape than Chinese-made APCs and IFVs, they proved capable of acting as 'battle taxis': they could carry the infantry in close proximity to the main battle tanks during an advance. The BMP-1 shown here was left in its original olive green overall and carried the standard armament – including a turret-mounted 73mm 2A28 Grom low-pressure smooth bore short-recoil semi-automatic gun and a 7.62mm PKT coaxial machine gun. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

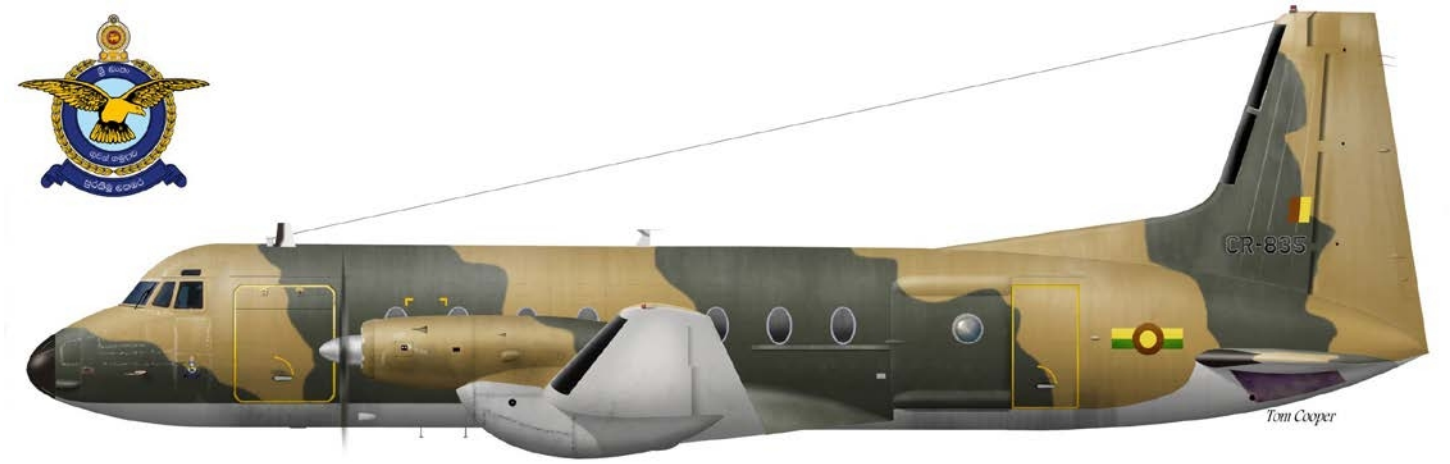
During the 1970s and 1980s, the SLAF acquired a total of 20 Bell 212s from a range of sources. Known construction numbers and associated serials were 31198/CH566, 31208/CH536, 31217/CH537, 31282/CH539, 31283/CH540, 31224/CH541, 31235/CH542 (shown here), 31239/CH543, 31240/CH544 (re-registered as CH565), 31243/CH545, 31258/CH546, 31235/CH547, 31236/CH548, 31259/CH548, 35026/CH560, 35027/CH561, 35028/CH563, 35029/CH564, 31240/CH565 and 31198/CH566. They wore a range of different camouflage patterns, including sand and dark green, dark earth and dark green, or dark green overall. During the early 1990s, they formed the backbone of the SLAF's helicopter fleet and were used for a wide range of purposes, including liaison, transport and as machine-gun and rocket-pod-armed gunships. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)

The primary combat aircraft of the SLAF in the early 1990s remained the venerable SIAI-Marchetti SF.260TP. Two of these (CT.127 and CT.128) were originally leased directly from the manufacturer, to be used for conversion training, but were eventually retained to replace losses. These two examples thus retained their original camouflage pattern in light sand, light earth and olive green on top surfaces and sides, and light blue on undersides (for the rest of the fleet, see Volume 1), and even the manufacturer and type insignia. Primary armament consisted of pods for unguided 68mm calibre rockets of French, Italian and US origin, but also included locally manufactured 50kg and 100kg bombs. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)




Aiming to improve its combat capability, the SLAF placed an order for four Argentine-made FMA IA.58 Pucara aircraft in 1991 and sent three pilots for a conversion course in Argentina. The low-wing twin-turboprop COIN strikers were delivered in two batches – one in 1992 and the other in 1993 – and saw intensive combat deployment against the LTTE. The usual armament (the total load carried by a Pucara was several times higher than that of the SF.260) consisted of pods for 68mm unguided rockets and locally manufactured SIG 125kg bombs, as shown here. Whilst their capability to carry 1,500kg of ordnance was highly appreciated, the Pucaras proved a handful to maintain and began suffering from corrosion problems. All four Sri Lankan Pucaras were painted in mid-grey on top surfaces and sides, and light grey-blue on undersurfaces: their registrations were CA.601–CA.604. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)

On 15 March 1993, the SLAF received its first three Mil Mi-17s acquired from Kazan Helicopters in the Russian Federation. All were assigned to the newly established No. 6 Squadron at Vavuniya and saw intensive utilisation within days of their arrival. All three (registrations CH-586 – shown here – CH-588 and CH-589) received exhaust diffusers, triple banks of chaff and flare dispensers on either side of the rear cabin, and a navigational radar under the nose. They arrived wearing a camouflage pattern in beige (BS381C/388) and olive drab (BS381C/298) on top surfaces and sides, and light admiralty grey (BS381C/697) on undersurfaces, and the misspelled service title (in English only) on either side along the roof of the cabin. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)




The SLAF operated three Hawker Siddeley (later British Aerospace/BAe) HS.748 Srs.2As during the early 1990s, including registrations CR-831, CR-834 and CR-835. Two of these wore this camouflage pattern in mid-stone (BS381C/362) and olive drab (BS381C/298) on top surfaces and sides, and an undetermined light grey on undersurfaces, while the third was painted in black-green on upper surfaces and sides. From 1990–95, all were operated by No.2 – later No. 201 – Transport Wing, SLAF, and were intensively involved in maintaining the air-bridge to Palali AB. Inset is the crest of the Sri Lankan Air Force, which is known to have been applied low beneath the cockpit of CR-835. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

In 1986, the SLAF acquired the first two Shanxi Y-8 transports from China: when one was written off, a replacement was acquired in 1993. All came from civilian use and thus retained their civilian livery during the early years of their service in Sri Lanka. The first two, CR-871 and CF-872, were painted in white overall, with blue cheat lines and decorative lines (as shown in the inset). While originally purchased for transport purposes and having no rear barbettes installed, they were also heavily utilised for attack purposes as barrel-bombers. A premature detonation of one such weapon led to the catastrophic loss of CR-872 on 5 July 1992. A replacement was acquired less than a year later in the form of the Y-8 registered as CR-873, which wore a gaudy livery in bright red and white, with black and yellow cheat lines. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

Bay of Bengal
Palk Strait
Palali AB
Chavakachcheri
Jaffna
Pooneryn
Elephant Pass
Iranmadu
Mullaittivu
Vellankulam
Mankulam
Nedunkeni
Mannar
Puliyankulam
Vavunya FOB
Gulf of Mannar
Indian Ocean
Trincomalee
China Bay AB
Pomparippu
Anuradhapura AB
Kalpitiya
Hingurakgoda FOB
Sigiriya FOB
Puttalam AB
Batticaloa FOB
SRI LANKA
Kandy
Katunayake AB
Colombo
Ratmalana AB
Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia
Panama
Indian Ocean
0km 20 40 60 80 100km
Air Base (AB)
Forward Operating Base (FOB)
Heliport
Army Base
Naval Base
LTTE's claim for 'Tamil Eelam'

almost immediately. Nonetheless, the whole assault failed and the groups of Tigers withdrew around 2300 hours, having suffered heavy losses – the defenders retrieved the bodies of 54 insurgents near their positions.

No new assault came the following day, as the LTTE opted to try to simply starve the garrison into submission. As it turned out, they had good prospects of achieving precisely that. A worrisome development for the beleaguered garrison had come when a Y-12 flying over the battlefield at 1,500 metres – out of the effective range of 12.7mm HMGs – was still damaged by ground fire: the appearance of the Radha Unit's ZPU-2 came as a shock for the SLAF, making any helicopter landings within the beachhead impossible. Moreover, even transport aircraft were henceforth forced to fly higher, thus further reducing the precision of their – already imprecise – supply drops. Nevertheless, and crucially, the 6th Sinha's CO had still assessed that his command could last without further supply for 14 days.[18]

## Operation Balevagaya

Unsurprisingly, the HQ of the SLA 2nd Division concluded that the 6th Sinha was doomed unless a major rescue operation was launched. The vulnerability of Elephant Pass had long been a source of preoccupation for the government forces, and several contingency plans were available when the crisis erupted. The first measure taken was to prevent the LTTE Vanni military command from sending any reinforcements to its units at the Elephant Pass. On 14 July, a task force under Brigadier Janaka Perera, comprising the 1st Commando Regiment and 1st Special Forces Regiment, had been assembled in the Weli-oya/Manal Aru area, and began to sweep toward local LTTE camps, under Operation Ashaka Sena. The two battalions continued their forays in the thick jungle until 25 July, losing 14 KIA during what in essence remained a deception measure. However, this did not bring any other significant result.[19]

However, Operation Ashaka Sena paled in comparison with the main rescue effort, named Operation Balavegaya (Power Force), which saw about 10,000 troops involved in the largest Sri Lankan Army offensive to date. The plan was to land a strong SLA force at Vettilakerni, secure a beachhead, and then advance 12km from there to Elephant Pass. Such an amphibious operation required a major SLN effort, under Rear Admiral Frank Wickramarathne. The Navy assembled a dedicated task force, including the LCS (landing craft support) vessels SLNS *Kandula* and SLNS *Pabbatha*, the Surveillance and Command ships SLNS *Edithara* and SLNS *Wickrema*, a transport converted into a hospital ship, the SLNS *Lihiniya*, the FGBs SLNS *Sooraya*, SLNS *Ranakamee*, SLNS *Rakshaka* and SLNS *Weeraya*, and the Israeli-made Dvora fast patrol boats *P454*, *P456* and *P457*. The ships carried four infantry battalions attached to the 1st and 3rd Brigades, but this was only the first wave, as another nine infantry battalions followed thereafter, while another Brigade HQ was activated to secure the rear of the other two brigades. These were supported by artillery batteries from the 4th Regiment (Type 56 85mm divisional guns) and 7th Regiment (120mm mortars), and two composite squadrons detached from the 1st Armoured Regiment (with four Saladins, five Saracens and one Ferret) and 3rd Armoured Regiment (with three Saladins and four Saracens). For the operation, the SLAF allocated no less than six SF.260TPs, four Y-12s, a single Cessna 337 for reconnaissance purposes, four Bell 212 gunships and two other Bells for transport duties.[20]

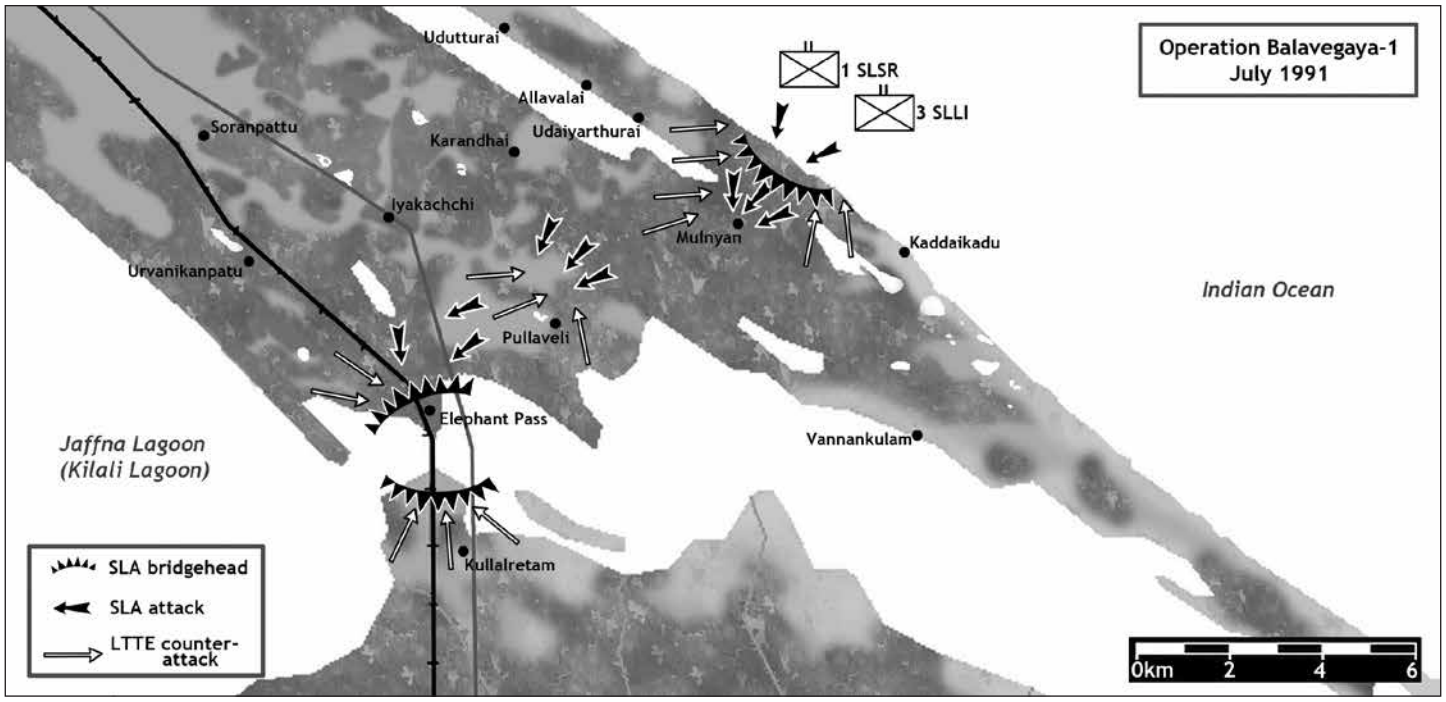
By midday on 15 July, the naval task force was sailing off Vettilakerni and its gunships began to bombard the intended landing beach. At 1400 hours around 300 infantrymen aboard 24 dinghies were deployed and approached the beach. However, and totally unexpectedly, they found themselves targeted by extremely heavy and accurate machine-gun and mortar fire well before reaching the shore. The intensity was such that the boats had to turn back 75 metres from the beach. As it turned out, the LTTE commanders had foreseen precisely such a landing operation and had deployed two small detachments to cover the Vettilakerni and Kaddaikadu beaches. Furthermore, LTTE radio operators began to jam enemy communications, adding to the confusion. After this failure, the task force commanders decided to wait until dusk, while the gunships continued to pound suspected enemy positions. The second landing attempt came of 1800 hours, with a first wave of 15 dinghies, each carrying 12 men. These received drastic orders: none could turn back before reaching the beach unless more than half of their crew and passengers were either killed or wounded. Nevertheless, enemy fire remained deadly, and only eight out of the 15 boats reached the beach before their casualties exceeded the 50 percent limit. The survivors managed to establish a foothold, and were reinforced by new waves of soldiers, allowing them to finally take control of the beach.[21]

**Table 9: SLA Order of Battle, Operation Balavegaya, July 1991**

| Unit | Attached units |
|---|---|
| Task force – Brigadier Vijaya Wimalarathne | |
| 1st Brigade – Colonel Sarath Fonseka | |
| | 1st Sinha |
| | 1st Gajaba |
| | 4th Sri Lanka Light Infantry |
| 3rd Brigade – Colonel Anton Wijendra | |
| | 4th Sinha |
| | 3rd Sri Lanka Light Infantry |
| | 3rd Gajaba |
| | 5th Gemunu Watch |
| 7th Brigade – Colonel Gamini Angammana | |
| | 1st Sri Lanka Light Infantry |
| | 6th Sri Lanka Light Infantry |
| | 1st Vijayaba |
| | 7th Sinha |
| Holding Brigade – Colonel Devinda Kalupahana | |
| | 6th Gemunu Watch |
| | 4th Gajaba |
| | |
| Supporting units | 4th Artillery Regiment |
| | 7th Artillery Regiment |
| | 1st Sri Lanka Armoured Corps |
| | 3rd Sri Lanka Armoured Corps |

## The grinding mill

Despite fierce opposition, the Sri Lankan government troops managed to expand their beachhead to cover 4km$^2$ the following day. However, by then, the LTTE command had opted to meet the new threat




A map of Operation Balavegaya (subsequently 'Balevagaya-1'), launched in July 1991 by the SLA with the intention of releasing LTTE pressure against Elephant Pass. (Map by Tom Cooper)

head-on. Large numbers of fighters surrounding Elephant Pass were rushed toward Vettilakerni, where thanks to the fanatical resistance of their local detachment, they were able to dig drenches and create bunkers and innumerable foxholes to oppose the two SLA brigades. Consequently, the whole operation turned into a battle of attrition – and the Tigers got the worst of it. While they managed to reduce the SLA advance to a few hundred metres per day, the local terrain, devoid of vegetation cover, could hardly have been worse from their perspective, as it allowed the attackers to make the most of its superior firepower. Even the soil was a problem, as the sand quickly filled up the trenches almost as soon as they had been dug out. Furthermore, only a few roads or tracks led to the battlefield, which greatly helped the SLAF day and night interdiction effort. Its aviators managed to destroy a number of LTTE supply vehicles, to the point that even drinkable water became scarce for the militants fighting in the area. Although the Tigers launched counter-attacks to retrieve lost ground or positions on several occasions, they suffered from ever-larger casualties in the process, notably in the pitched battles that took place in locations such as Mulliyan Kovil.[22] Ratha, a female unit commander, described the ordeal her forces went through in the aftermath of the landing:

> We were positioned near the Pullaveli church and prepared to face the army. They started their advance from Vettilaikerni towards Pullaveli at 09.00hrs on the 16th July. They advanced in full force with tanks, armoured vehicles and thousands of infantry men moving under the cover of extremely heavy aerial and naval bombardment on our positions. […]
>
> On the first day the battle raged for several hours. In the evening the fighting would stop and there [were] no face-to-face confrontations at night. Nevertheless our girls did not get any sleep during the four days of the battle. Thousands of army men were positioned straight in front of us waiting to catch us off guard so they could break through our lines. But our girls remained fully alert at night in anticipation of such tactics, reconnaissance encroachments, or lightning raids by the army. The bombardment and helicopter strafing went on throughout the night. Our girls remained in the battle position for four days and nights.
>
> […] The continuous bombing of the area created enormous logistical problems and totally disrupted our supply lines. Consequently, our women fighters went without a regular intake of food for the four days during which the battle raged. Furthermore, we fought under the blazing hot sun which made us very, very thirsty. Because of the disruption of supply lines, water could not reach us. Our fighters were parched with thirst. In the end we found a very small shallow pool of dirty water. We took some of the water, sterilized it with the few water purifying tablets we had with us, drank it and quenched our thirst.
>
> […] The unfavourable terrain and the difficulties we faced seemed to be a challenge to our girls, releasing unknown resources of courage. For example, our team of supply girls had to overcome extremely hazardous conditions to reach our positions. The bombers relentlessly attacked the entire route along which our cadres were bringing supplies. Already the bombardment had destroyed many of our supply vehicles. We lost many cadres also during these bombing raids. Nevertheless, despite the death of colleagues or the numbers of cadres who fell injured during the raids, the surviving girls in the supply and support team were undeterred and pushed on through the torrent of bombardment to bring whatever supplies they could.[23]

The slugging match continued unabated during the next two weeks, with the SLA troops grinding their way forward, and the balance swung gradually more in their favour as new infantry battalions were introduced, as well as another brigade HQ, while the Tigers had already thrown the bulk of their available forces into the fighting. Seeing that the writing was on the wall, the LTTE gambled on reversing the flow of the battle by mobilising all their available fighters to launch several attacks against the beleaguered 6th Sinha from 27 July onwards, with the usual combination of improvised armour and infantry, but all of these assaults failed. By 1 August, the spearheads of the 1st and 3rd Brigades were less than a kilometre away from the camp, and the Tigers began to withdraw. The following day, during

Two LTTE combatants demonstrating the tactics of infiltrating SLA position: note the heavy use of foliage for camouflage purposes. (LTTE release)

the afternoon, a composite armoured squadron of six Saracens and six Saladins under Major Shiran Jinasena broke through the LTTE line in two places, supported by infantry. The resistance of the last Tiger elements in the area was overwhelmed during the next 48 hours, and the relief force linked up with the Elephant Pass garrison on 4 August, thus ending their long ordeal. Immediately afterwards, the SLA's task force launched a series of clearing operations around the camp: running until 14 August, these destroyed whatever LTTE bases could be found in order to deter another build-up. From 18 August, the troops were redeployed, with the army keeping, aside from the Elephant Pass camp, a garrison in Vettilaikerni. Extensive minefields were constructed linking the two locations, thereby interdicting the north–south movement of the insurgents.[24]

### A turning point

The failed assault on Elephant Pass was the most severe LTTE defeat to date: the organisation lost 602 KIA – including 123 women – during Operation Tharai Kadal Aahayam. This was not only three times more than the 202 killed suffered by the SLA, but also equivalent – if one takes into account the wounded – to no less than 15 percent of the entire movement. Indeed, by the end of 1991, the LTTE had lost 1,614 KIA – compared to 961 in 1990. The first consequence was the movement's introduction of conscription, and even forced recruitment, to both make up for these staggering losses and to bolster its overall numbers.[25]

While Velupillai Prabhakaran claimed subsequently – 'for public consumption' – that, "We have shown the world that we have evolved from a guerrilla force to one that can fight a conventional war with a modern army",[26] the LTTE leadership was well aware of the beating it had taken. Indeed, a systematic reassessment of its tactics, but also its organisation and even grand strategy, was undertaken in the aftermath of the defeat – and the ensuing changes were to have a long-lasting effect on the future course of the war.

From then on, the LTTE did not engage in pitched battles on open ground if it could be avoided. The movement concluded that further such undertakings were pointless unless the LTTE reinforced its naval branch to the point that it would prove able to deny the SLN access to specific areas – and thus the army the ability to rescue besieged coastal garrisons. It had also become obvious that the use of brute strength to overwhelm major enemy positions was not enough, and indeed, was counterproductive. From then on, any large-scale LTTE attacks were to be thoroughly prepared, and preceded by months of almost manic intelligence-gathering targeting the intended objective. In turn, this was to make possible simultaneous and carefully prepared multi-pronged attacks, designed to land a decisive single blow against an enemy position. As a result, the LTTE intelligence-gathering structures were reorganised and totally overhauled.[27]

# 5
# BULLET COVER IS BETTER THAN STEEL COVER

After the Elephant Pass victory, Brigadier General Denzil Kobbekaduwa not only resumed but also intensified the overall strategy of wearing down the insurgency with repeated offensives. This proved highly successful in the long run, because the LTTE fighters were drawn into battle on several occasions and suffered significant losses as a result. Indeed, and provided it benefited from at least some element of surprise, the SLA tended to make initial advances against small numbers of insurgents, until the LTTE dispatched large-scale reinforcements to launch counterattacks. Both sides thereby suffered similar losses, but these were easier for the SLA to replace. None of these operations were spectacular, but their repetition wore down the insurgents sufficiently to prevent them from concentrating enough forces to regain the initiative on the operational level for more than a year. During the next few months, another facet of this strategy became more apparent when the security forces launched several operations designed to sever the connection between the Jaffna Peninsula and northern Sri Lanka, in a gradual process that was intended to eventually end with a massive offensive to recapture the peninsula.

The first large-scale foray took place almost as soon as the Elephant Pass camp surroundings had been cleared, and again targeted the Manal Aru/Weli Oya area. Because of its strategic importance as the main insurgency avenue for north to east movements, the area proved an excellent target for the Sri Lankan Army's strategy of attrition.

While in zones such as Vavuniya or Mannar, the Tigers could content themselves to avoid the offensives and reoccupy the lost ground once the enemy had vacated it, that was not the case in Manal Aru/Weli Oya. Even more so, the Mullaitivu district had been a traditional LTTE sanctuary – mostly covered by thick jungle – since IPKF times, and was dotted with numerous camps and other infrastructure, including the infamous One Four Base.[1]

The longer the war went on, the more intensive the fighting became. By 1993, the SLA introduced ever-more protective gear for its troops, including ballistic helmets made of Kevlar and protective vests with Kevlar around the front and rear – as seen in this photograph of an SLA machine-gun operator. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

## Lightning Strike

By the end of August 1991, the SLA had assembled in the Manal Aru/Weli Oya area a strong task force under Brigadier Janath Perera, which controlled the 1st Commando and 1st Special Forces, the 1st and 4th Sinha, the 4th Gajaba and the 5th Gemunu Watch Battalions. The usual combination of SLAF assets, including a pair each of Bell gunships and transport helicopters, Y-12 and Y-8 barrel bombers and a single Y-12 used as an airborne command post, were also mobilised. A naval task force centred on the FGB SLNS *Weeraya* and the FACs *P453*, *P456*, *P458*, *P463* and *P464* was sent to interdict enemy sea traffic along the nearby coast. These forces began to move on 29 August, initiating Operation Lightning Strike (*Akunu Pahara*).[2]

During the first two days of their three-pronged progress towards the LTTE Michael base, their main objective, the Sri Lankan troops did not met any resistance – until 2 September, when they reached the Nithikaikulam area, where the militants had entrenched themselves along a river bank. The LTTE had been aware of the oncoming offensive, and rushed reinforcements to face the onslaught. Aside from several female companies, the command also dispatched elements from, among other units, the crack Imran Pandian Padai Ani. Even trainees who had not completed their basic training, were sent in Nithikaikulam to act as support troops, carrying supplies or evacuating casualties.

Unsurprisingly, the whole operation turned into a protracted slugging match in the middle of thick jungle, in nightmarish conditions where enemies could be separated by only a few metres and remain invisible to each other. Furthermore, the battlefield was dotted with numerous LTTE camps, among which the Michael base was the largest, and these were sometimes connected with underground tunnels, while the whole area was infested with innumerable Johnny mines. The terrain also eased the insurgents' nocturnal infiltrations, constantly sneaking behind enemy advance parties to sow new anti-personnel mines in areas considered as cleared, thus causing new casualties. The SLA infantry nonetheless managed to advance gradually and seized several camps during the following weeks, and finally invested the Michael camp on 25 September, with the operation ending the following day. Strikingly, the forward SLA elements had needed four days to cross the last 100 metres that separated them from the latter camp.

In total, the SLA lost 74 soldiers KIA during the 28-day battle, while another 278 were wounded. The whole affair was a gruesome

Mines caused massive casualties among the SLA troops through all operations against the LTTE, but especially so during Operation Lightning Strike, when the insurgents deployed a large number of modern anti-personnel mines. This soldier has lost most of his foot to one such mine. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

experience for the insurgents too: 30 out of the 100 unarmed trainees sent by the Imran Pandian Padai Ani for support duties lost their life during the battle. The LTTE itself acknowledged to have lost over 200 KIA, including 56 female combatants.[3]

### Operations Seal Off and Conch Shell

From 14–16 October 1991, the SLA conducted Operation Seal Off in the Manal Aru/Weli Oya sector, seizing control of the Kokkuttuduvai coastal area near Kovil Point and establishing two company-sized garrisons there to assert a measure of control over the region's land traffic. The operation went almost unopposed.[4]

Something much more significant came two days later with the beginning of Operation Valampuri (Conch Shell). The 10th Brigade Group, under Brigadier T.G. Thillekerathne, with no less than five battalions, retook the islands of Kayts and Mandaithivu – this time keeping them permanently under government control. Once the two islands were captured, the brigade initiated the second phase of Valampuri on the morning of 22 October with a landing on the Vanni mainland. This was followed by a swift advance during which Pooneryn and Kalmunai Point were seized, almost without resistance as the area had been left undefended by the LTTE. The SLA established a large camp on the Pooneryn Peninsula, securing control of the second main communication artery with the Jaffna Peninsula.[5]

However, the Northern Command campaign was undermined once again when several of its battalions were withdrawn and sent to the east of the country. Lieutenant General Cecil Waidyaratne, the new SLA commander who was appointed on 16 November – widely described as both a theoretician and a disciplinarian more than a 'soldier's soldier' – had already concluded that the lack of overall strategy was blighting the war against the LTTE. He advocated reducing the security forces' commitment in the north to the bare minimum and to concentrate instead on efforts in the east, where he assessed the LTTE to be more vulnerable because these areas had large non-Tamil populations. Once the Tigers were eradicated in the east, he argued, the full might of the security forces could be turned against the north to finish off the LTTE. However, at no point during the 1990s was the government in a position to follow such a strategy. Furthermore, the new army commander also proved irritated by Major General Kobbekaduwa and Brigadier Wijaya Wimalaratne's influence over the armed forces' overall planning, and allegedly attempted to undermine this, creating division among the army officer corps as this rift in the higher command became widely known.[6]

### Sixers

Large-scale offensive operations in the north resumed only after a lull of several months, beginning with Operation Vanni Wickremesekera 3 during February and March 1992 in the Vavuniya area, which met with limited success. The next major effort again came in the northern part of the Manal Aru/Weli Oya area. The operation, baptised Hayepahara, involved a strong task force under Brigadier Rohan Daluwatte, whose command included the 6th Gajaba, the 6th SLLI and the 6th Sinha, supported by guns from the 6th Artillery Regiment, with the offensive consequently becoming widely known as 'Sixers'. As with Operation Lightning a few months previously, the main objective was to seize several LTTE camps and inflict heavy casualties on the insurgents. However, the LTTE got wind of the forthcoming offensive in time to reinforce the area, and the operation turned into a slugging match almost as soon as it began on 17 March. The Tigers prepared a massive ambush involving two companies of the Imran Pandian Padai Ani, and successfully triggered it at dawn against the SLA vanguard. The latter, despite being supported by T-85 and T-86 IFVs, was forced to withdraw, while the Tigers recovered an abandoned jeep-mounted 106mm recoilless gun in the confusion. It was the first time that the LTTE had laid its hands on such a potent anti-tank weapon, and the lost RCL became a major source of concern for the Armoured Corps.[7] The confusion continued thereafter, as described by the 6th Gajaba's second in command:

> The advance commenced with the 6th GR as the right assault battalion and the 6th SLLI as the left assault battalion; the 6th SLSR was the reserve battalion. Within a very short time, the fighting became intense and the situation was critical. We felt the troops in front were losing control and my CO, Lieutenant Colonel Tissa Jayawardane, and I decided to go to the front line to try and regain control.[8]

The same officer also provided a telling illustration of what it was like to be on the receiving end of the LTTE's standard 'battle of infiltration' tactics, just before he was wounded and evacuated from the battlefield:

> The situation continued to worsen with mounting casualties and I had to physically move to the front line, to have better control. It was literally a dog fight and the young officers could not control the situation. We fought a fierce battle for the next half hour and

A view of the open-topped turret of the sole command T-85 of the SLA, showing its 7.62mm machine gun. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

One of the brand-new Type-86 armoured vehicles (shortened to 'T-86' in SLA parlance) of the 3rd SLAC waiting for the order to advance: 12 such IFVs were acquired in 1992. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

> suddenly, a group of terrorists appeared from behind [the] cover of a nearby house and started attacking us from the flank. We quickly retaliated, but soon were under heavy and effective fire from two directions; from the front and the right.[9]

The battle continued unabated during the next weeks, with the army slowly bulldozing its way through the dense jungle, waging a myriad of short-range engagements as it went and seizing several camps in the process until the operation ended on 31 March. The LTTE suffered 233 KIA during the battle, but SLA losses had been staggering, with 26 KIA on the first day alone and its hospitals overwhelmed by the number of wounded evacuated from the front line.[10] Brigadier Rohan Daluwatte claimed that many of the SLA casualties were caused by inadequate training at the NCO and junior officer level, and he wrote in a post-operation report: "The temptation to panic when a leader is hit should be avoided. The next in line should take over command and continue with the offensive. Pausing or turning back even for a short time can be disastrous […] More training has to be carried out together to build up mutual trust."[11]

## Russian dolls

In late May, the Sri Lankan Army launched two simultaneous offensives in Jaffna and Mullaitivu. Operation Whirlwind, the first of these, was another expansion of the Palali base perimeter, and in turn, began with Sea Lion, a diversionary operation. Sea Lion consisted of shelling from land and naval artillery, as well as airstrikes, against known LTTE positions in Valvettithurai, in the hope that the Tigers would conclude that these were the prequel to a larger ground advance and would move reinforcements accordingly. Whirlwind, the real blow, launched on 29 May, when 9th Brigade under CO Colonel Anton Wijendra, with the 1st Gajaba, 1st Vijayabahu and 3rd SLLI, supported by armoured bulldozers and six T-55s, broke through from the opposite side of the base and advanced in the Tellipillai area. During the next few days, the brigade advanced through a maze of bunkers, entrenchments and minefields, and by 30 May had seized a 10km$^2$ area, including the Tellipillai locality itself. The Tigers did not oppose the advance in strength and withdrew, leaving the bodies of nine of their fighters behind. Nonetheless, Operation Whirlwind proved a comparatively bloody affair, largely because of landmines, with 9th Brigade losing 19 KIA and 75 wounded.[12]

Once Sea Lion – which served as a diversion for Whirlwind, which was itself a diversion – had been initiated, the main effort came in Mullaitivu. Five infantry battalions (1st SLLI, 7th Sinha, 1st Gemunu Watch, 5th Vijayabahu and 6th Gajaba) and B Squadron of the 4th Armoured Regiment with eight T-55s and one ARV, under Major B.A. Perera, all controlled by a dedicated task force led by Colonel Wasantha Perera, had been concentrated in the town's military camp. The main objective of Operation Sathbala (Seven Powers) was to seize Alampil, which would in turn allow the security forces to control the Nayaru lagoon.

The advance began on 28 May, with the task force moving along the coastal road connecting Mullaitivu with Alampil. While this was Tiger heartland, several areas were at least not covered in thick jungle, thus offering better fields of fire and hence, an advantage to the SLA. By 2 June, the task force had advanced 8km and seized Alampil, although at a price of 38 KIA lost during a series of violent clashes with the insurgents. From 3–5 June, elements from the task force advanced further east and destroyed a Sea Tigers base in Chenmalai, following another bout of fierce fighting, which concluded the operation. As intended, a battalion was left to garrison Alampil in the aftermath of Sathbala, but this soon became extremely difficult to support, and the position was abandoned later that year.[13]

## Operation Balavegaya II

The Tigers had swiftly dealt with the minefields laid by the SLA in the aftermath of Operation Balavegaya to bar movement between the Jaffna Peninsula and the Vanni, clearing multiple paths. Government forces realised that the only way to effectively cordon off the peninsula was to permanently occupy the area, so a new, division-sized operation, named Balavegaya 2, was conducted with a three brigade task force, each brigade with two battalions, under Brigader Vijaya Wijendra. Armour, artillery and engineer detachments were also utilised. From 28 June, these forces launched a series of thrusts from both Elephant Pass and Vettilaikkeni, gradually seizing the intervening areas until 10 July, when the operation was completed.

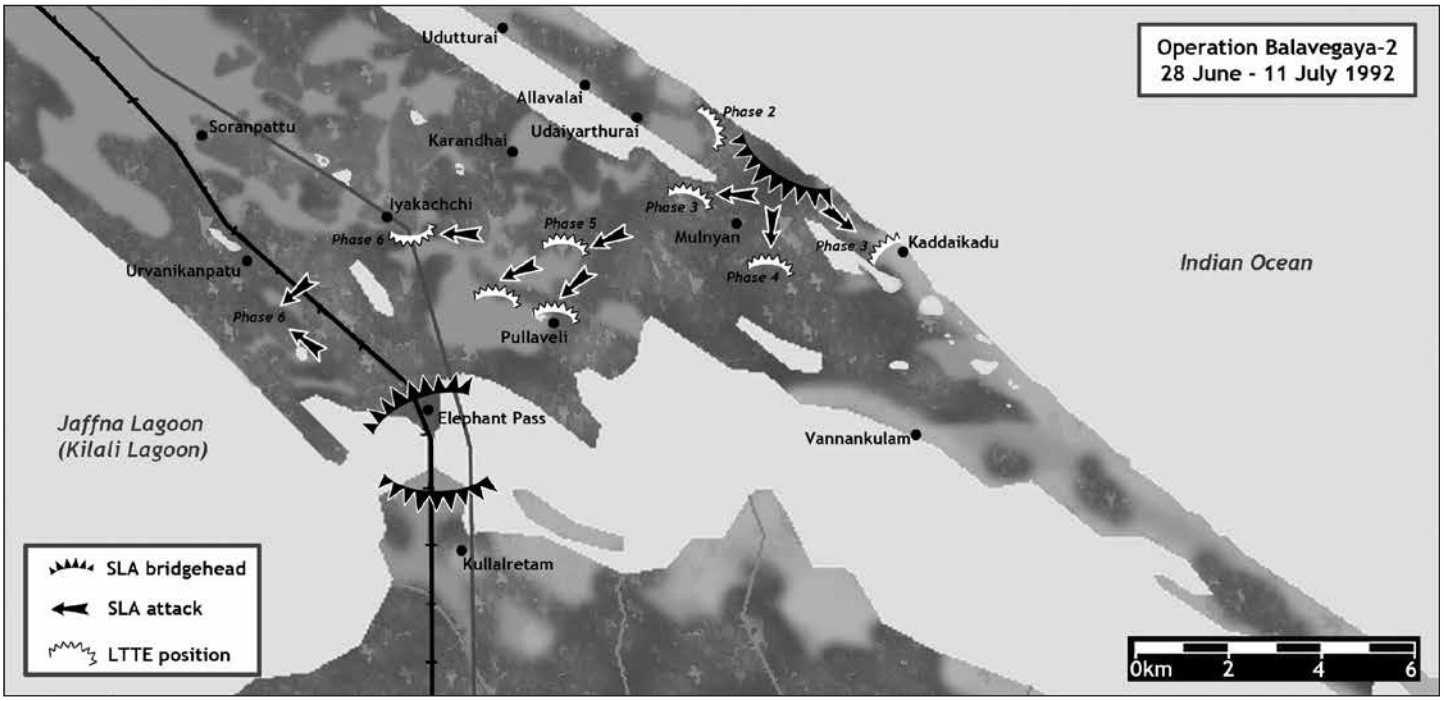
The LTTE's intelligence had identified the offensive's preparations well in advance, so five or six companies of both the Charles Anthony and Imran Pandian Padai Ani had been sent to defend the area. The subsequent battle was fierce, although the LTTE proved unable to block the main SLA thrusts in the long run. The Army forces launched multiple secondary attacks during the operation, which prevented the insurgents from concentrating their fighters to cover the main axes of advance.

| Table 10: SLA Order of Battle, Operation Balavegaya 2, June 1992 | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Unit** | **Commander** | **Notes** |
| Task force | Brigadier Vijaya Wijendra | |
| 2nd Brigade Group | Colonel Anton Wijendra | 6th SLLI, 6th Sinha |
| 4th Brigade Group | Brigadier Srilal Weerasooriya | 1st GW, 1st VR, IV SLAC (T-55 det.) |
| 6th Brigade Group | Colonel Parakrama Kulathunga | 7th Sinha, 1st Gajaba |

A T-55 of the 4 SLAC in the process of ammunition replenishment. Note the crewmember standing guard outside the vehicle, and an unknown marking applied low on the left side of the glacis. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

The Tigers used what had become one of their standard defensive tactics, designed to make up for their structural weakness in manpower and firepower, and which proved much more effective than any linear defence system. This essentially involved disposing their forces in well-camouflaged and well-protected platoon-sized positions, separated from each other by 1–2km, following a simple or double zigzag pattern. These forces were kept under strict radio silence to maintain their invisibility until contact was made. Meanwhile, intensive reconnaissance was conducted in front of the defended areas, giving the local LTTE commander detailed information about the advancing enemy; he could then issue suitable instructions to his different platoons, notably declaring which one of these was authorised to open fire first. Only then were radio communications allowed again. Most of the time, the platoon facing the enemy advance was instructed to withdraw, allowing the SLA to penetrate unimpeded into the defensive system. This led to the enemy unit finding itself suddenly targeted by fire from different directions, with multiple insurgent platoons perfectly positioned to launch flanking attacks. This dynamic defensive system also proved advantageous because it kept the insurgents dispersed, thereby minimising their casualties against superior enemy firepower.

Nonetheless, the 4 SLAC T-55s proved very effective in this terrain, providing the attackers with a major advantage, but the tanks were anything but invulnerable. Following the introduction to the battlefield of tracked armoured vehicles over previous months, the LTTE had reacted by raising specialised seven-man anti-tank teams,




A map showing the main movement of SLA units during Operation Balavegaya II, from late June to early July 1992. (Map by Tom Cooper)

equipped with two RPG-7 launchers each, but also trained in the use of satchel charges and AT mines. These tank-hunters damaged 10 T-55s during the battle with RPG rounds. Although only one of the tanks was permanently disabled, it prompted the Armoured Corps to design and produce its own rubber side skirts, which were then mounted on the flanks of its T-55s fleet and proved highly successful against RPG rounds.[14]

### Mystery of CR-872

Overall, Operation Balavegaya 2 ended in a clear-cut victory for the armed forces, but with one obvious drawback: the army needed to use several battalions to garrison the 15km-long forward defence line across the neck of the Jaffna Peninsula. The operation also ended in tragedy for the Sri Lankan Air Force. The SLAF had mobilised a significant part of its fleet to support the advances, particularly its Y-12s and Y-8s in barrel-bomber configuration – with spectacular effect, according to a LTTE fighter who took part in the battle: "The Sri Lankan Air Force used Y-8s circling high over our positions, out of range of our anti-aircraft guns, before descending to lower their altitude to drop twelve to fifteen bombs in a row and climb again as fast as they could. It was nerve-wracking."

However, on 5 July, at around 1700 hours, the Y-8 registration CR-872, carrying a crew of six officers and 12 airmen (including the pilot, Squadron Leader Faizal Caseer, co-pilot Flight Lieutenant Priyantha Fernando and navigator Pilot Officer Manjusha Wijekoon) suddenly exploded in mid-air whilst flying over Iyakachchi. The aircraft crashed in an insurgent-controlled area, killing the whole crew. Bell helicopters of No.4 Squadron flew several search and rescue missions during the following days but could only retrieve the bodies of several crewmembers. The SLAF later announced that the four-engine aircraft had suffered from a critical technical failure whilst carrying supplies from Ratmalana AB to Palali AB, although the LTTE claimed to have shot it down.[15] However, the same LTTE combatant quoted above witnessed something entirely different: "I saw one of these planes drop its bombs, when suddenly, one of these exploded just under and behind the aircraft, bringing it down, instantly."[16]

### A still-born decisive blow

By mid-July 1992, the army assessed that the time was right for taking the Jaffna Peninsula, and therefore began planning a series of large-scale operations to expel the Tigers from their main stronghold. The first step of this reconquest consisted of massing forces on Kayts Islands, which was to be used as a launching pad for an amphibious landing in the Araly area, on the north-western part of the peninsula. Once this operation was completed, the government forces would have had three major footholds in Jaffna and would thus be able to launch major thrusts from either Elephant Pass, Palali or Araly – making the overextended defenders' task almost impossible.

However, the LTTE were boosted by events on 8 August when two Land Rovers carrying a party of army and naval officers were blown up by a landmine on Kayts Island, killing nine aboard, among them Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and Brigadier Vijaya Wimalaratne. As Northern Area Commander and Jaffna Security Forces Commander respectively, these two officers had been the kingpins of all SLA operations in the north since virtually the beginning of the war, and the driving force behind the constant offensive stance which had followed the battles at Elephant Pass. While replacements swiftly came in the form of Major General Gerry de Silva and Brigadier Rohan Daluwatte, who became Northern Area Commander and Jaffna Security Forces Commander respectively, they were much less familiar with the specifics of the northern theatre and were only at the beginning of their learning curve. Neither did they have the influence of their forbearers. As a result, the ambitions and tempo of army operations markedly diminished almost immediately in the years after the deaths of Kobbekaduwa and Wimalaratne, including the intended multi-phased Jaffna operation. Indeed, Kobbekaduwa's grand plan of landing in the peninsula had from the outset met with mixed reactions from his superiors, as it would unavoidably have caused heavy casualties among the armed forces.[17]

### Feeble Earthquake

Due to the loss of two of the SLA's leading commanders, the next army offensives, instead of being the opening moves of a decisive campaign, were limited in nature. On 20 August 1992, Operation Earthquake began when 9th Brigade (CO Colonel Anton Wijendra, with the 1st SLLI, 5th and 6th Gemunu Watch, 3rd Gajaba and 1st Vijayabahu) sallied from the western flank of Palali. By the following day, when the operation ended, the brigade had seized the Tellipallai and Madagal areas – roughly 20km$^2$. This was followed by Operation Chathuranga on 18 September, a single-day undertaking in which Colonel Wijendra led an advance by five infantry battalions, supported by T-55s, from Madagal to seize Pandatharippu – all of 2km away. Two weeks later, in the Mannar district, a task force under Brigadier Vajira Wijeratne – with the 3rd SLLI, the 1st and 4th Sinha and the 6th Gemunu Watch – made a large-scale sweep along the coast from Mannar island to Silwathurai to reopen the land connection between the two locations, the Tigers having reinvested the areas since the battles of March and April 1991.[22]

These moves were nowhere near enough to continue to tie down the LTTE: on the contrary, it appeared that the 'bullet cover is better than steel cover' strategy had unravelled as the Tigers gained badly needed breathing space and thus the ability to concentrate forces to launch their own large-scale attacks and regain the initiative they had been deprived of for almost a year. The first sign of this came on 24 September 1992, when they launched a limited attack against the Pooneryn base. During the night of 24/25 September, the insurgents raided the western side of the camp perimeter, killing 25 soldiers from the 4th SLLI and 5th Gemunu Watch. This was, however, only a taste of what was to come.[23]

### Night raids

Only a few days later, the LTTE had completed preparations for another night raid, this time targeting the army-built Forward Defence Line linking Vettalaikerni to Elephant Pass, constructed in the aftermath of Operation Balavegaya II. This line had been designed along what had become the standard army pattern by then, replacing the pre-war 'satellite' system of outposts built outside the main camps. While adequate for COIN warfare, such a defensive system was courting disaster in the semi-conventional warfare context of northern Sri Lanka. The Forward Defence Line consisted of a 2-metre-high bund, preceded by two lines of barbed wire and minefields. The bund itself was dotted with bunkers and sentry points emplaced at regular intervals – each designed to be manned by between four and six men and having a clear field of fire of at least 100 metres. The bund system itself acted as a giant tripwire, able to slow down a large enemy attack long enough for reinforcements to be dispatched.

This time, the LTTE had selected to attack a section of the bund near Vettilaikerni, at Kaidaikadu, where an army camp had also been built, occupied by elements of the 1st Gemunu Watch. Around midnight on 1 October, an LTTE force including two companies of women fighters successfully cleared several paths across the minefields and barbed wire defences without being detected and assaulted a series of

## The Lion of the North[18]

Denzil Lakshman Kobbekaduwa was born on 27 July 1940. After studying at Trinity College in Kandy, he began his training as a cadet in the Sri Lankan Army in 1961 for three months before being sent to Sandhurst, where he studied for two years, until being commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Armoured Corps in August 1962. He subsequently returned to England, undertaking training courses at the Royal Armoured Corps Centre at Bovington, the British Army Staff College and finally the Royal College of Defence Studies. Denzil Kobbekaduwa led Operation Liberation in 1987 – the first ever SLA division-sized offensive – and was in command of virtually all the army's large-scale offensives thereafter, becoming the most experienced Sri Lankan Army commander. This put him in a position similar to that of Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on the eve of the Pacific War: while an operational commander, his personal influence was enormous and allowed his views to weigh heavily in the armed forces' strategic decision-making, which would normally have been the prerogative of organs such as the Army HQ or the Joint Operation Command. Furthermore, he was a charismatic leader, almost revered among the rank and file, and well known for his preoccupation about the wellbeing of the troops under his command, as recalled by Major General Kamal Gunaratne:

> I believe no one would be offended, if I say Lieutenant General Denzil Kobbekaduwa was the most beloved and most respected officer our Army has ever produced. He was an 'Officer and a Gentleman' of the highest calibre and personally, I consider it an honour and a great privilege to have had the opportunity to work under him […] He got the maximum work out of us, but he also looked after us.[19]

In turn, this meant that the consequences of his death proved devastating for the war effort, Major General Sarath Munasinghe commented: "[The] death of General Kobbekaduwa and other senior officers sent shock waves all over. We realized that it would take many more years to defeat the LTTE without the General and the other senior officers."[20]

What made matters worse was that Major General Kobbekaduwa's closest associate also died on 8 August 1992, leaving him without a natural successor. Brigadier Vijaya Wimalaratne was not only renowned as an expert in jungle warfare, but also an extremely gifted commander, with Brigadier General Kamal Gunaratne saying of him:

> Major General Vijaya Wimalaratne was considered the 'Real Man of the War' […] He was a true leader, with all the leadership qualities one could think of. The wealth of military knowledge he possessed was incomparable and enriched by his vast experience. He had the unique ability to motivate the petrified into facing the enemy with courage […] he was the closest comrade and confidante of Lieutenant General [*sic*] Kobbekaduwa.[21]

Kobbekaduwa visiting an injured SLA soldier. (Mark Lepko Collection)

A platoon of SLA troops on a patrol in 1993: while the troops were better trained and more combat experienced than ever before, patrolling operations in northern Sri Lanka remained some of most dangerous military activities of the time. (LTTE release)

Ready for more: a squad of LTTE Tigers about to move out for their next operation. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

bunkers and sentry posts. Another – seaborne – detachment was also landed in the area. The sudden attack confused the defenders – of the bund, and the adjacent camp too – who withdrew towards the much larger base at Vettalaikerni, leaving the Tigers free to seize all they could carry from the smaller base, and destroy the rest. However, it was not long before mortar batteries at Vettalaikerni began to target Kaidaikadu, and the insurgents withdrew, unwilling to deal with the counterattack that was bound to follow, as well as SLAF airstrikes once daylight came. Twelve SLA soldiers were killed – mostly from the 1st Gemunu Watch – during the raid, while the Tigers suffered 14 KIA, including three women fighters. However, the insurgents had seized at least 200 rifles and LMGs, as well as a large stock of ammunition, including mortar shells and grenades.[24]

The Tigers next targeted the Palali base, whose Forward Defence Line was much stronger and more heavily defended, including a higher density of fire positions, and also trenches and towers with searchlights. Again, the LTTE concentrated several male and female companies, with the intention of breaching a part of the perimeter before withdrawing in a single-night operation. The attack came on 23 November against a 4km section linking the coast to Ottakapulam, on the eastern side of the perimeter, largely held by the 1st Sri Lankan Engineers. Despite suffering severe casualties, the insurgents nonetheless managed to breach the defence line following the same *modus operandi* as at Kaidaikadu – killing 46 Sri Lankan soldiers in the process, with another five missing in action – before withdrawing to avoid the SLA counterattack. The insurgents claimed to have captured large stocks of equipment, but had suffered severe casualties too, the female wing alone losing "more than thirty women cadres" that night.[25] That same night, the Tigers launched another attack against an army position in the Vavuniya area, but were repulsed. However, these raids were a worrying sign from the SLA perspective, highlighting that the offensive tactics developed by the LTTE after the Elephant Pass battles – consisting of launching extremely well-prepared infantry infiltrations – enabled the insurgents to break through even strongly held perimeters. On 24 December, the insurgents landed another heavy blow in the Manalaru/Weli Oya when they ambushed an army detachment moving between Kovil Point and Kokkutuduwai, killing 42 men, including two officers, mostly from the 6th SLLI.[26]

# 6
# RISE OF THE SEA TIGERS

With Sri Lanka being an island, and with the bulk of its most strategic towns and facilities lying along its 833 miles of coastline, it was unavoidable that the conflict also turned into a naval war. Indeed, both sides knew that victory at sea was a prerequisite for winning on land.

Once the war resumed in mid-1990, the Sri Lankan Navy's main missions remained the same as they had been during the previous decade. Emphasis continued to be placed on controlling the coastal waters in an attempt to cut-off the insurgents' maritime supply links with the outside world. In the meantime, the SLN also played a crucial supporting role for the SLA by moving troops and supplies to the isolated garrisons in northern Sri Lanka – without which these could not have been sustained for long. Furthermore, from 1990 onwards, and beginning with Operation Sea Breeze, the Navy conducted countless amphibious operations, proving instrumental in providing operational mobility to the armed forces, while its combat ships were also ever-more engaged in shore-bombardment missions in support of the ground troops.

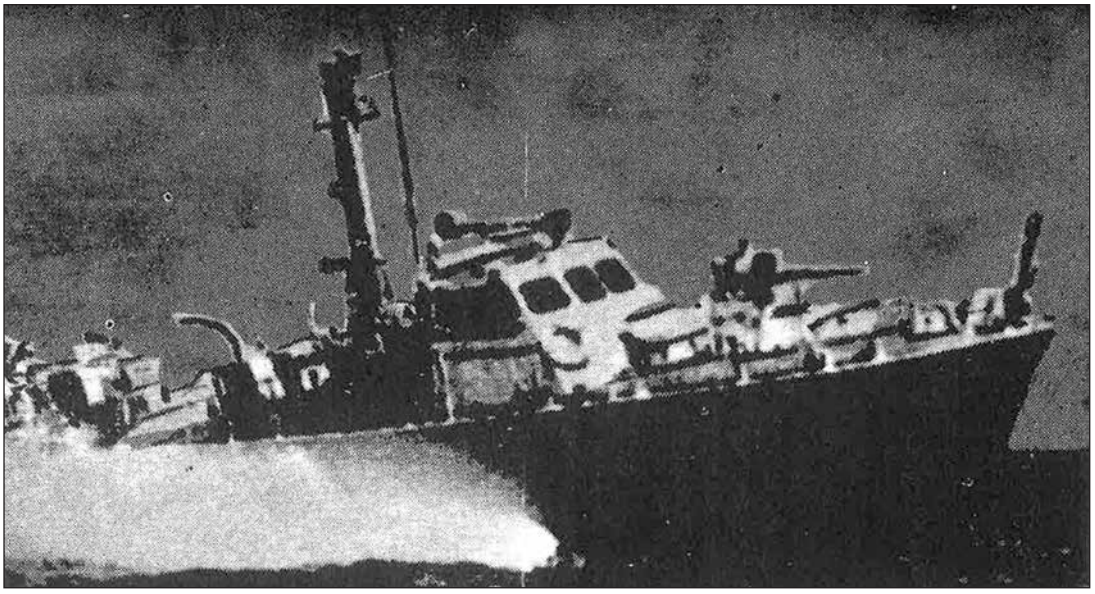
## The coastal force

Between 1990 and 1994, the SLN continued to operate a fleet of less than 100 ships of limited size and capability, mostly acquired during the 1960s and 1970s. Its larger combat ships remained the 330-ton SLNS *Jayasagara* (hull number *P601*) and SLNS *Sagarawardene* (*P602*), each equipped with two pairs of 25mm guns and two 12.7mm HMGs and carrying a crew of 45. Next came the fleet of Shanghai I and II gunboats operated by the 3rd Fast Gun Boat Squadron. By 1990, the squadron had seven of these comparatively heavily armed ships (each had two twin 37mm and two twin 25mm guns): SLNS *Sooraya*, *Weeraya*, *Dakshaya*, *Ranakamee*, *Balawatha*, *Jagatha* and *Rakshaka*. These were soon reinforced by the SLNS *Ranasuru*, *Ranawiru* and *Ranarisi* of the same class, bringing the number of FGBs to 10. The 4th Fast Attack Flotilla continued to operate the fleet of fast attack craft, which included 12 Dvoras bought in Israel (hull numbers *P453–P458* and *P463–P468*), as well as the three South Korean Killer-class (*P473–P475*) and 10 40-ton FAC built in Sri Lanka during the early 1980s (*P231–P235* and *P241–P245*). A vexing problem was that the Navy could not acquire more of the highly popular Dvoras because a major scandal erupted in the early 1990s once it became known that Israel had provided training to both the Sri Lankan Special Forces and Tamil militants at virtually the same time, with Colombo suspending any new weapon acquisition as a result.

In 1992, the SLN also ordered four 22-ton patrol craft of the SM500 class from Simonneau Marine in France, and introduced them the following year, but had to abandon a more ambitious plan consisting of assembling several others in Sri Lanka. These reinforced the existing fleet of 20-ton patrol boats built in Sri Lanka during their early 1980s (*P201–P204*, *P211*) and those bought in the UK (*P221–P225*). Furthermore, the Navy had invested in small inshore patrol craft (IPC): 12 5-ton IPCs were inducted between 1988 and 1992 (*P111–P123*), as were the slightly larger *P150–P152*. All of these carried a crew of four or five men and had a single 12.7mm HMG as their main armament.

Almost all of these vessels lacked endurance, especially as the Navy had only a limited number of naval bases. The main harbours were Trincomalee and Colombo, in that order, but in the north, the service could only rely on Kankesanturai and Karainagar. This problem led to the use of mother ships to both sustain and direct the small patrol craft. Thus, the SLN operated six converted merchantmen – the SLNS *Abeetha* (*P714*), SLNS *Edithara* (*P715*), SLNS *Wickrema* (*P716*), SLNS *Mahaweli* (*A24*), SLNS *Lanka* (*A25*) and SLNS *Kanthi* (*A26*) – for this purpose. All were lightly armed but carried comparatively good radar and communication devices, and became known as Surveillance and Command ships, operating under the 7th Surveillance Command Squadron. Commodore Ajith Boyagoda described how these ships became vital to SLN patrolling activities by the early 1990s:

> In general, at this time [i.e., in 1993] the Sri Lankan Navy would have to berth a mother ship in the ocean which could refuel smaller ships. These smaller vessels would return to it periodically for refuelling. The mother ship, a converted cargo ship, also carried high-definition radar surveillance equipment and could direct the smaller, quicker vessels. It would point them [to] the areas of suspicion. But time was naturally lost in the trips back and



One of the earliest photographs of an Israeli-made Dvora Mk.I fast attack craft of the SLN. Based on the design of the Dabur-class of US origin from the early 1970s, the Dvora Mk.I-class was manufactured by Israeli Aircraft Industries with COIN operations in mind. It was powered by two diesel engines connected to two shafts and had a crew of around a dozen. Armament consisted of two 20mm Oerlikon guns (one fore, the other aft), usually reinforced by a pair of 12.7mm heavy machine guns. (LTTE release)

> forth. And the mother ship, stationary and visible, was obviously vulnerable to attack.[1]

Crucial for the Navy's role in supporting land operations were the landing ships SLNS *Kandula* (*A537*) and SLNS *Pabbatha* (*A538*), along with the fast personnel carriers SLNS *Hansaya* (*A540*) and SLNS *Lihiniya* (*A541*), all inducted during the second half of the 1980s. These were reinforced during 1991 with the landing craft SLNS *Gajasingha* (*L839*), built by the Colombo Dockyards and inducted at the end of 1991, and the *L820*, a Chinese-built landing craft of the Yunnan-class. All SLN ships operated under regional commands: Area Command North, East and West, as well as South from 1992.[2]

## On a shoestring

However, the naval service did not benefit from funding proportionate to its increasingly vital role. While its manpower grew from 8,100 ratings and officers in 1990 to around 10,000 in 1993, this number remained stable thereafter, while the introduction of badly needed new ships remained extremely limited. As a result, existing resources were taxed to the full. To take one example, the LCMs SLNS *Pabbatha* and SLNS *Kandula* were frequently at sea for as many as 24 days during a single month. Crucially, the SLN had to give up on its intention to acquire large offshore patrol vessels, and thus was unable to control the country's exclusive economic zone, especially as it did not have a dedicated air wing – which was deemed equally unaffordable – and the SLAF did not purchase any dedicated maritime patrol aircraft. The problems for the SLN went further than the mere number of ships, as many small pieces of equipment were lacking too. The radars in use were of limited efficiency, while the service did not have night vision goggles. In turn, this limited the capability of the SLN ships to operate at night, having to rely on standard binoculars and searchlights. Lack of adequate communication equipment was a major problem too, to the point that while operating in 'shadow' areas such as off the islands of Mullaitivu or Deft, some ships were unable to establish contact with land stations or distant vessels. Again, Commodore Boyagoda testified as to the countless difficulties under which the Navy had to operate: "You have to remember we were no superpower. We didn't have a lot of high-technology, just small boats with low profile systems, patrolling a vast area, with limited visibility at sea. There were constant technical and weather problems and it was a matter of doing our best with makeshift arrangements."[3]

Nevertheless, some of the SLN's failures were self-inflicted. There were not enough trained specialists such as electricians, and the service's own research and development was neglected. The latter point was a symptom of a prevailing feeling of overconfidence, which in turn caused the service to underestimate the growth and threat emitted by its nascent foe – until it was too late. Even then, the Navy almost continuously found itself a step behind its enemy, most of the time merely reacted to their new initiatives.[4] Finally, once the threat became obvious, the service tended to stick to a 'cure-all' remedy by placing all its hopes on its small fleet of Fast Attack Craft, as explained by a former commander of the 4th Fast Attack Flotilla: "I think the Navy put so much effort and confidence on the FACs. We failed to see anything beyond that. As a result, the FAC flottilla was the work horse of the navy. I used to say if the FAC turns back, the fleet turns back. When the fleet turns back, the navy turns back."[5]

## From Sea Pigeons to Sea Tigers

During its early life, the LTTE had been content to rely on a fleet of small smuggling boats and several speedboats to ship militants and personnel between northern Sri Lanka and its vital rear-area bases in Tamil Nadu. To do that, it had the immense advantage of the large communities of fishermen and smugglers in the Jaffna Peninsula, who were renowned for their intimate knowledge of the often treacherous waters of the Palk Straits. Indeed, Valvettithurai, the place of birth of the LTTE leader, was widely known as a smuggling hotbed. In 1984, the movement created a dedicated maritime branch, the Sea Pigeons (*Kadal Purai* in Tamil), to oversee the maritime traffic between Jaffna and Tamil Nadu. The branch was first led by Kittu (the alias of Sathasivam Krishnakumar), the LTTE Jaffna military commander and a former smuggler himself, until he was injured in 1986. Therafter, characters such as Kundappa, Ragu and Shankar (the alias of Vaithilingam Sornalingam) took over until 1990.

During these formative years, the Sea Pigeons avoided engagements with the Sri Lankan Navy, relying either on their speed – in the case of speedboats – or stealth – in the case of fishing boats – to escape from their pursuers. While their vessels were seldom intercepted, it happened nonetheless on an occasional basis, costing the lives of a number of their seamen and passengers. Hence, it was not long before the Sea Pigeons tried to hit back at their rivals, but all such early attempts failed. A small number of home-made sea-mines were lain along the sea roads regularly followed by SLN ships, but without any success, either because no ship ever passed close by or because the mines were unreliable. The movement also built its first ever combat speedboat, the *Kadalkuruvi* (Tamil for Sea Frigate), armed with one 12.7mm HMG and a 7.62mm GPMG, to escort other supply boats, but no engagements with SLN vessels were reported. Furthermore, in the mid-1980s, the movement procured a few civilian underwater breathing sets and in 1986, Sulojan, a militant trained in diving, attempted to sabotage Navy vessels moored along the pier of Karainagar naval base. However, he was detected because of the bubbles released by his breathing apparatus and was killed, becoming the first LTTE combat diver lost in action.[6]

By 1984, the LTTE also began to develop its own merchant fleet, which allowed it to end its dependency on Indian deliveries of supplies. That year, they acquired the MV *Cholan*, their first ever merchantman. Kumaran Padmanabhan (or K.P., the alias of Tharmalingam Shanmugam), who became the mastermind of the LTTE's international weapon procurement and shipping system, explained these early naval developments:

> Actually, when we started this arms struggle we did not think much about the ocean. At the beginning we only transported our small arms from South India to the north of Sri Lanka. And also sometimes we escaped from the north to South India. For that reason, we only used small boats. We did not think about the ocean. Actually, this stared after 1984 when we were in South India. Then we were based in Madras, and we were exploring the diaspora. Especially we visited Malaysia and Singapore. Then we started to concentrate on the ocean. Until 1984 no one thought about it.
>
> In 1983 we met a ship captain in India. Actually, he was working in a commercial ship. At that time we discussed transporting equipment from Singapore to South India. Initially we used some commercial ships. Some of those commercial ships transported some smuggled goods from Singapore to South India. Then we thought this is sometimes difficult, why can't we start our own service? So finally, we came to a conclusion. We had to buy a ship. We had already established some networks in our coastal villages. Also, we knew that some seamen who were working in shipping lines were there. This captain also knew some people, so we bought a second-hand ship from Singapore. It was a very old ship and was around 500 tons. We took the ship from Singapore, repaired it and

selected the crew from our villages. Then we took the ship to South India and that was the beginning [of our merchant fleet].[7]

A still from a video showing one of the early attack craft of the LTTE's Sea Tigers: this speedboat was seemingly armed with a single heavy machine gun (probably a 12.7mm Browning captured from the SLA). (LTTE release)

By 1991, the LTTE owned six such freighters, registered under a galaxy of shadow companies and changing their names constantly to avoid detection. These were mostly operating in south and southeast Asia, mainly carrying regular cargoes such as cement and timber between countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia, thereby earning revenues for the movement. By the early 1990s, this maritime shipping network, which the LTTE baptised the 'Exclusive Economic Zone Marine Logistics Support Team' (EEZ-MLST), was known to use various bases, including those established on Phuket Island, Thailand, or another small island, Twante, off the Irrawaddy delta in Myanmar, while the network headquarters itself moved constantly between Singapore, Indonesia, Malaya and Thailand to avoid detection. Weapon procurement was eased by the presence of vast and easily accessible stocks in Cambodia, which was slowly emerging from decades of war. Thus, from time to time, the merchantmen were mobilised to carry weapons, ammunition and other supplies off the Tamil Nadu and Kerala coasts, where the cargoes were shipped to the movement's warehouses in India, before being carried to northern Sri Lanka by the Sea Pigeons.

To ease the transhipment operations between their freighters and the Tamil Nadu coast, the movement even ordered a tailor-made ship from the Kerala shipyard, the *Kadalpura*. This ship carried not only a radar and communications equipment, but also had a concealed compartment to hide its illegal cargo, while its first skipper was a militant known as Kumarappa. However, the LTTE blundered into using the *Kadalpura* for a run directly to the Jaffna Peninsula after the ceasefire with the government had been signed and the IPKF troops deployed. On 2 October 1987, the vessel was intercepted by the SLN Dvora *P467*, and its crew and passengers – including several high-ranking cadres – captured.[8]

In 1989, once the IPKF began its withdrawal, the Sea Pigeons moved their headquarters from Tamil Nadu to the Jaffna Peninsula. They began to prepare for their expansion by creating a small suicide unit and sending a batch of militants to Singapore to receive specialised training. They also started to issue their own distinct uniforms.

That something was 'in the air' became obvious on 13 December 1990, when the Malaysian authorities seized the MV *Sun Bird*, one of the LTTE merchantmen, and confiscated its shipment, which included three speedboats and no less than 21 outboard motors (OBM). The cargo also included hundreds of HF radios and walkie-talkies, as well as ammunition and uniforms, 15 scuba kits, four air compressors and 43 night vision binoculars.

The Sea Pigeons were renamed Sea Tigers in 1990, while Thillaiyampalam Sivanesan (alias Soosai) took over from Shankar as the leader of the outfit in 1991, with Gengai Amaran as his second in command. The Sea Tigers then totalled around 400 men, and these were split into several departments: the Boat Group, the Sea Mine Group, the Cutout Group, the Repair Group and the Boatyard Group. By then, the LTTE naval wing operated several speedboats equipped with civilian radar and at least one HMG. On 21 July 1990, the Sri Lankan Navy caught and destroyed one such boat, armed with two 12.7mm machine guns and powered by two 225hp and three 55hp OBM. By May of the following year, the Navy reported having destroyed six comparatively large speedboats, but did not specify if these were armed.[9]

## First naval battles

Once war resumed, the Sea Tigers had readied their own suicide squad, the Sea Black Tigers, and it is with these that they landed their first blow after several weeks of closely monitoring SLN ship movements off the Jaffna Peninsula coast. Three fishing boats packed with explosives were prepared and readied to launch, along with two other boats, in the vicinity of Kankensanthurai. The three Sea Black Tigers tasked with crewing the suicide boats were Yogarajah Koneswaran (alias Kantharupan), Velupillai Thilagarajah (alias Vinoth) and Fernando Sylvester (alias Collins), who all waited until a suitable target came close by.[10] This finally happened on the evening of 10 July, when the Surveillance and Command ship SLNS *Edithara* sailed into the area. However, despite having its communications jammed by the enemy to prevent it calling for reinforcements, the crew of the initially unsuspecting ship defeated the Sea Tigers' attack, as recalled by its skipper, Lieutenant Commander Sarath Weerasekara, who ordered other SLN ships in the vicinity to escape once he saw the enemy boats:

> We exchanged fire with LTTE terrorists positioned at a hotel situated along the coastal road. During the fire fight, we moved closer to land and fired at LTTE positions with our main armaments. Around 8.30 p.m., a cluster of boats approached us. We quickly realised that the pattern of deployment of enemy craft was different, hence the crew acted swiftly and decisively. Those manning 14.5mm main armaments successfully engaged one of the fast moving craft about 75 metres away from its target causing a massive blast. It was only then that we knew that SLNS *Edithara* was facing a suicide attack. The boat rushing towards us was blown up about 50 metres away from our ship. But the third [boat] got away when the main armament jammed. Those manning 7.62 weapons successfully engaged the third vessel when it was about 10 metres away from the ship. The shock waves caused by the massive blast caused minor damage to the vessel, killing one midshipman. Had one suicide craft hit the ship, the remaining two would have smashed into it, leaving two attack craft to kill those struggling in choppy waters.[11]

## Fishing boats and nets

This first large-scale Sea Tigers attack thus ended in failure, although it had a long-lasting and negative effect on the Sri Lankan Navy. Sri Lankan coastal waters were crossed by hundreds of fishing boats –

LTTE commander 'Gaddafi' (in light shirt, right) with a 20mm Oerlikon cannon and two 12.7mm Browning heavy machine guns recovered from *P464* – the first Dvora-class FAC of the SLN to be sunk in the war. (LTTE release)

SLNS *Abeetha*, after being heavily damaged in a suicide attack on 4 May 1991. (SLN)

often sailing in groups – which were particularly active during early evening (when they laid out their traps) and very early in the morning (when they went out to collect their catches). Following their 10 July attack, the Sea Tigers opted to use single suicide-craft disguised as fishing boats, with fishing nets lain to hide the massive explosive charges they were carrying and were to only close very progressively toward their intended target. From the SLN crews' perspective, it meant that a mortal threat could emerge suddenly from these groups of fishing boats – in the form of a small suicide-craft – almost at any time, forcing the sailors into constant and nerve-racking vigilance. Unsurprisingly, allegations of SLN ships opening fire on civilian boats coming too close to them became frequent.[12]

Furthermore, the Navy began to systematically provide an escort to its larger and slower ships to protect them against similar attacks. At the time, the insurgent suicide-craft did not have the speed to engage fast-moving SLN combat vessels such as the FAC and FGB. From July 1990 at least, all Surveillance and Command ships were escorted at all times by at least one FAC, denying the SLN use of such vital craft elsewhere. Furthermore, the SLN ships also sailed further off the coast. The Sea Tigers made a new attempt at a suicide attack early on the morning of 4 May 1991, along a similar pattern to before, but using a single suicide-craft crewed by Sampukutty Pathmanathan (alias Jeyanthan) and Periyathamby Chandran (alias Sithamparam). The boat moved into a group of several other fishing boats, and these closed slowly on the Surveillance and Command ship SLNS *Abeetha* while its two FAC, *P453* (skippered by Lieutenant Rohan Amarasekera) and *P454* (Lieutenant Manoj Jayasuriya), were sailing separately, each a few miles apart from the mother ship. *P454* sighted the group of boats and dashed to intercept them, but too late to prevent the suicide boat from rushing straight for the *Abeetha*. Jayasuriya hurriedly warned the Surveillance and Command ship, but in vain, as the *Abeetha* did not open fire on the approaching Sea Black Tiger craft, as explained by its commanding officer, Captain A.H.M. Razeek:

> We were positioned about 10 nautical miles north of Point Pedro. Three or four FACs had been attached to my ship. On the day of the incident, we spotted a boat speeding towards *Abeetha*. Although we were suspicious about the approaching vessel, we didn't open fire as it could have been one of our own fast attack craft. When we realised the approaching craft wasn't one of ours, nothing could be done. It was an attack carried out by a single explosive-laden vessel.

This time, the attack proved devastating. The detonation of the charge carried by the suicide-craft blew a large hole in the *Abeetha*'s hull above the waterline, killing nine sailors and wounding another eight. In the confusion that followed the detonation, the crew of the damaged ship opened fire on the approaching *P454*, forcing the FAC to turn back. Thereafter, the badly damaged SLNS *Abeetha* was sent back to Trincomalee to be repaired.[13]

A third suicide attack following the same pattern came almost two years later. On 29 August 1993, a suicide-craft disguised as a fishing boat, crewed by four Sea Black Tigers, successfully closed on the Dvora *P464* (captained by Lieutenant A.B. Wimalaweera), which was patrolling off Point Pedro.[14] The detonation killed 12 servicemen and sunk the FAC. The Sea Tigers sent another boat carrying divers to search the wreck, retrieving not only several machine guns, but also the vessel's 20mm gun, the first of its kind ever possessed by the insurgents.[15]

## Change of paradigm

The year 1991 proved decisive for the Sea Tigers, for two main reasons. The first was that, in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by

the LTTE on 21 May, the Indian authorities cracked down on the movement's infrastructure in southern India. Contrary to earlier times, this was no half-hearted attempt, and both the national and local authorities in Tamil Nadu went all-out. A greater emphasis was also placed on interdicting LTTE ships in Indian national waters, which forced the movement to change the pattern of its supply runs. The merchantmen now had to approach around 30–40 miles off LTTE-occupied coasts in Sri Lanka. There, they had to meet with the Sea Tigers boats to unload their shipment at sea, which were then brought back to shore. Initially, this was done off Mulaitiivu, but the rendezvous points were later moved to other parts of the eastern and western coasts to avoid SLN patrols. This meant that the Sea Tigers needed enough specifically designed boats, which had to be fast, low in the water and able to carry as many supplies as possible. In May 1991, the SLN assessed that the LTTE had eight such supply boats, powered by either two 250hp or five 85hp OBMs. The LTTE also needed potent combat speedboats to protect them if they were intercepted by Sri Lankan Navy patrols. However, the necessity to expose their precious merchantmen so close to the Sri Lankan coast, and with a now hostile Indian Navy operating in these areas too, was not without risks, and indeed cost the LTTE two of its precious cargo ships.

In November 1991, the Indian Navy caught and boarded the LTTE-owned trawler *Tongnova*. Much worse came on 13 January 1993, when the 280-ton merchantman MV *Ahat*, carrying arms and ammunition, including ZPU anti-aircraft guns, was intercepted in international waters, roughly 290 miles east of Sri Lanka's southern coast, by the Indian Coast Guard Ship *Vivek*, which was reinforced the following day by the Indian Navy corvette INS *Kirpan*. The two Indian vessels forced MV *Ahat* to re-route towards southern India. By 16 January, the merchantman, still closely monitored by the two Indian ships, had anchored off Madras, but its crew continued to refuse to surrender or to let Indian sailors come aboard. On the same day, *Vivek* and *Kirpan* were supported by the patrol vessels INS *Savithri* and INS *Mithun*, each carrying a helicopter and a commando team with their dedicated assault boat. However, once they closed in on the LTTE ship, nine crew members jumped overboard and were later captured, whilst 10 LTTE militants set the vessel on fire, opening up with small arms on the commandos – triggering heavy return fire from the Indian ships – before either being killed or committing suicide. Among them were Kittu, the former Jaffna commander and then head of the LTTE London office, and Kutti Sri, the main LTTE mortar expert and chief designer of the Pasilan 2000 mortars.[16]

The costly failure at Elephant Pass in July 1991 had shown that in order to win such battles in the future, the movement needed the ability to temporarily deny specific sea areas to the Sri Lankan Navy. In other words, the LTTE naval wing needed to be strong enough to meet head-on and repulse the heavily escorted enemy troop convoys trying to land reinforcements for the garrisons threatened by the insurgents.

In essence, and for these two reasons, the LTTE leadership came to the conclusion that it was control of the sea that would determine if the war would be lost or won, and made no secret about this.[17] Indeed, Velupillai Prabhakaran himself made this crystal clear during one of his speeches: "Geographically, the security of Tamil Eelam is interlinked with that of its seas. It is only when we are strong on the seas and break the dominance the enemy now has that we will be able to retain the land areas we liberated and drive our enemies from our homeland."[18]

## Fibreglass navy

However, it would take another several years before the Sea Tigers could really take on the SLN on anything like an equal basis.

A still from a video showing one of Miraj-class fast attack craft of the LTTE. (LTTE release)

Meanwhile, the Sea Tigers Boatyard Group continued to develop and build small series of ships of different designs and purposes – virtually all of them with fibreglass hulls – and gradually improved these, following a trial and error process. The Sea Tigers' engineers were inspired by foreign designs to build their own models from scratch, equipping them with imported OBMs, weapons and communication equipment such as satellite phones and GPS devices, as described by Kumaran Padmanabhan: "Initially they built boats locally by using fibreglass materials. But later on they got high-speed boats made in Singapore and Thailand and transported them to Sri Lanka. Thereafter they copied the design and built a large number of boats locally."[19]

In this fashion, an entire family of combat speedboats, known under the generic designation of 'Miraj', made their appearance, as well a dedicated high-speed suicide boat design family, known as 'Kaffir'. Aside from carrying explosive charges triggered by contact fuses on poles protruding from the bow, these were also partly armoured to protect the charge and the crew. The movement continued to produce several transport boats, some able to carry a vehicle, to take on board the cargo of merchant vessels at sea or carry troops and equipment between points along the Sri Lankan coast. The Boatyard Group engineers, however, had to work with significant restrictions, the most important of which was that, to avoid detection by the SLAF, the Sea Tigers soon opted to use tractor-mounted trailers to move their boats away from the coast as soon as their mission was complete before camouflaging them inland. This requirement reduced the maximum size of their designs to a length of between 16 and 21 metres, with a width no greater than 5.5 metres. One benefit that came from these limitations was that the Sea Tigers' craft were low in the water and had a low cross-section, making them difficult to detect on radar. Ironically, even the fibreglass hulls turned into an advantage because they were easily penetrated by projectiles, thus limiting the damage received by the boat.[20]

The Sea Tigers also gradually expanded their land infrastructure, building several bases along the north-eastern and north-western coasts of Sri Lanka, known as 'launching pads' in SLN parlance. In early 1993, they even set up a base at Mullikulam, south of Silvathurai, ironically forcing the SLA to evacuate without firing a shot the camp it had fought so hard for in March 1991. Crucially, the Sea Tigers began to operate small shore radar stations to monitor enemy sea traffic, with the first of these being located close to the Palali base defence perimeter to observe ships sailing in and out of Kankesanturai harbour. Altogether, by the end of 1993, the LTTE naval branch had at least 1,000 militants. In 1994, the Sea Tigers even established their

own Maritime School and Academy, by when they had also activated a dedicated Maritime Reconnaissance Team. More surprisingly, the development of semi-submersible craft began in 1994, with the help of naval engineers from Singapore who had to be smuggled into LTTE-held areas. However, while a number of prototypes of various designs were produced during the following decade, it remains unknown whether any of these were actually used in smuggling operations.[21]

### Collins Mines

From the war's resumption, the Sea Tigers developed and produced an array of sea mines, with the most infamous being the Collins Mines, so-called after the Sea Black Tiger of the same name. These were designed to lay between 1 and 2 metres under the surface and were equipped with a pressure detonator. Altogether, from 1991 on, the insurgents laid between 100 and 150 sea mines along enemy sea roads, with an emphasis on the northern harbours' approaches.

Their first success came on 2 September 1991, when the IPC *P143* was sunk by a mine while sailing along the coast of Nanathivu Island, killing six sailors. Next was *P118*, sunk in the Jaffna lagoon on 3 February 1992, with three seamen killed, and finally *P119*, destroyed by another mine near Pooneryn, although the whole crew survived. On 10 September 1992, the insurgents had another success, but by following a completely different *modus operandi*: a remote-controlled mine was buried underwater near the jetty of the Killveddy ferry, and detonated once a platoon of soldiers aboard a truck boarded the ship, killing 22 soldiers and six civilians.[22]

Despite these few successes, the deployment of sea mines proved a disappointment for the Sea Tigers and had virtually no effect on the SLN's ability to sail in northern Sri Lanka waters. They were relatively easy to spot, with the SLN clearing a number of them in the waters off the Karainagar base in early 1991. Furthermore, laying minefields turned out to be a risky business. On 21 April 1992, SLN patrol boats had been sent to investigate an area off Point Pedro after the Navy had been tipped of about the possible transit of enemy supply boats in these waters. The SLN sailors soon sighted a group of boats acting strangely, keeping a rigid formation with 100 metres separating each boat from the other. It turned out that they were laying a minefield. The FAC opened fire, destroying around 10 of the LTTE boats. To add insult to injury, it seems that a number of these mines suffered from a defective triggering device or simply drifted astray.[23]

### LTTE's Decima MAS[24]

As the confiscation by the Malaysian authorities of various pieces of diving equipment aboard MV *Sun Bird* in December 1990 had shown, the LTTE naval wing had not given up in its attempt to train and equip an underwater demolition team (UDT): on the contrary, eventually it did just that. The movement thus managed to acquire an array of military grade-equipment, such as closed-circuit scuba sets or underwater pistols. The Sea Tigers also procured underwater scooters and underwater communication systems. Their technicians developed several purpose-built underwater charges, weighing between 50 and 100kg, in fibreglass containers protecting a charge of glycerol, TNT or C4. Obviously, it took them years to acquire the knowledge required for conducting such specialised operations, and to train a batch of proficient combat-divers – all of whom were expected to be able to move 10 miles underwater on their own. At last, in 1994, the Sea Tigers had a core of fully trained divers who formed the Sulojan Unit, which was followed by the female Angaiyarkanni Unit, named after the first male and female combat divers killed in action.

By mid-1994, the Sea Tigers' UDT had perfected its tactics. Ingress was made with two operators using an underwater sea scooter, the driver able to use a GPS device to find his way. Once close enough to the target, the pilot left the combat diver to continue alone, carrying the explosive charge with him. Once under the hull of the targeted ship, the diver could fix the charge with a special glue solution or tie it with ropes to either the propeller or rudder shaft. Alternatively, the diver could attach the charge to the hull under the engine compartment and blow himself up with it. While almost always enlisted as Sea Black Tigers, the divers were instructed to use the latter solution only as a last resort, as their specialised know-how and training made them extremely valuable.

The first known attack by the team came on 16 August 1994, targeting the *A516* Surveillance and Command ship. This was an easy prey, as it was suffering from engine malfunction and had been moored for weeks off Kankesanturai, acting as a static surveillance post. Pushpakala Thuraisingham (alias Angaiyarkanni), a female Sea Black Tiger, successfully placed a charge under the ship. The detonation sank the ship, but killed the diver too, although the crew did not suffer any casualties. On 17 August, the Tug *Dheera* was sunk in Kankesanturai, without any casualties. These two attacks had been conducted by a team of six combat divers, of which only two came back alive.[25]

### Bloody lagoon

With the occupation of Pooneryn by the SLA in October 1991, and the foot of the Jaffna Peninsula in July 1992, the only remaining link allowing the insurgents to connect their forces in the peninsula with the Vanni was the Kilali lagoon. The LTTE soon organised a shuttle service connecting the harbour of Kilali to various landing points on the north coast of the Vanni. The insurgents forbade civilian traffic through the Army-controlled areas and made it mandatory to use its shuttle service instead, mobilising hundreds of small boats for this purpose. Ironically, this became a new source of income as people had to pay 150 LKR per head for a one-way trip across the lagoon.

Unsurprisingly, the Sri Lankan Navy established a naval detachment in Nagathevanthurai, near the Pooneryn army base, to both interdict LTTE naval traffic in the Kilali lagoon and provide supplies to Elephant Pass through the lagoon. Indeed, by late 1992, the lagoon itself was declared an exclusion zone, and any unknown boat was considered as hostile. A crucial factor was that the lagoon waters were extremely shallow, with a maximum depth of 3 metres, and very often only between 1 and 2 metres. Therefore, only Inshore Patrol Craft could be used to patrol the lagoon, and around 10 of these were permanently based in Nagathevanthurai. The local geography acted as an equalising factor between the SLN and the still nascent Sea Tigers. The SLN IPCs, also known as 'waterjets', were crewed by between four and six sailors and armed with a single HMG: they had the advantage of carrying a radar – an invaluable asset as the insurgent shuttle service operated only at night – and communication equipment. By the end of 1992, these were supported by a radar station established in Nagathevanthurai, whilst in late October 1993, a second naval detachment was established at Elephant Pass, on the other side of the lagoon.[26]

Before long, the LTTE grouped the boats used for the shuttle system into convoys – and these began to be escorted by the Sea Tigers' combat and suicide boats. The insurgents deployed the first of their Muraj-class boats in the lagoon, armed with either a 12.7mm or 14.5mm HMG, as well with GPMGs and RPG-7 launchers, on custom-made mounts to ensure improved precision. By 1993, a dedicated force, the Charles Padai Ani – named after a Sea Tiger leader killed in the lagoon in late 1992 – had been created and controlled between 20 and 25 attack craft. Simultaneously, the Sea Tigers raised

the Mani Arasan Padai Ani, specialised in the deployment of suicide attack boats – the infamous Kaffir-series designs, also known as 'Stealth'. The Sea Black Tigers driving these were often veterans who had suffered from crippling injuries in battle, and the suicide boats' steering systems were adapted to their specific handicap.

Thus, during the last months of 1992, the stage was set for a series of fierce night-time engagements between the SLN waterjets and LTTE convoys – with usually devastating results for the latter. At the end of September, four boats carrying militants were destroyed, while on 2 October, two SLN waterjets intercepted a convoy of six supply boats escorted by two Sea Tiger attack craft. The Sea Tigers not only proved unable to prevent the SLN patrol craft from destroying five out of six of the supply boats, but lost one their own, after an hour-long running battle. Other engagements followed, with the same results, and by 25 October, the Navy reported it had destroyed a total of 30 enemy boats in the lagoon and captured several others. While every destroyed boat was classified as 'LTTE' or 'Sea Tigers' by the Navy, the vast majority of these were carrying supplies or passengers and were in essence unarmed, slow and defenceless.

This continued during the following months, with the Sea Tigers organising ever larger and better-escorted convoys – with allegedly as many as 50 boats – sometimes including up to 10 Sea Tiger craft, triggering occasional large-scale sea battles. SLN Inshore Patrol Craft also began to coordinate with the artillery batteries located in Elephant Pass, and even received night air support from SLAF Bell 212 gunships. It was not long before one of these engagements turned into tragedy. During the night of 2/3 January 1993, four boats carrying civilians suffered from engine problems and fell behind the convoy they were part of. They were subsequently intercepted by SLN waterjets, which opened fire on them, killing 35 civilians. This was not the first, nor the last, of such slaughters, for as many as 328 civilians may have been killed in the lagoon during the first four months of 1993 alone. Two new convoy intercepts took place on 8 and 9 February 1993, during which the SLN Inshore Patrol Craft claimed to have destroyed 17 boats and captured another 13, mostly loaded with bags of sugar and rice. By then, the Navy claimed to have destroyed 160 boats in the lagoon since July 1992.[27]

One of the improved Miraj-class fast attack craft of the Black Sea Tigers: note the larger superstructure and the installation of a 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun on the bow. The rear of the ship was apparently armed with a much lighter 7.62mm PK-series machine gun. (LTTE release)

A typical transport craft of the Black Sea Tigers, with its low freeboard, necessary to hide from radar and the prying eyes of the SLN. (LTTE release)

### Wolf Packs

Such convoy battles continued thereafter, with the Navy's waterjets usually exacting a heavy toll on their prey for no losses in return. However, there were not enough of these successes to totally close the Kilali lagoon to enemy traffic, so the SLN failed to sever the last artery connecting the Jaffna Peninsula to the Vanni mainland. In hindsight, this failure to go all-out in the lagoon had far-reaching consequences that were to haunt the SLN for almost a decade. Whilst the Sea Tigers took much heavier casualties than the SLN in the lagoon, it was there that they learned the intricacies of naval combat, albeit by following

a steep learning curve. Nonetheless, results were initially extremely limited at best for the LTTE. On 30 August 1992, *P166* was captured after a chance encounter with an insurgent group of infantrymen whilst it was sailing close to the coast in Mandativu, while *P199* was destroyed by a sea mine on 26 February 1993.

However, before long, the Sea Tigers' most gifted tactician, Brindan Master, who was self-taught by reading countless books about naval warfare, decided to resurrect the U-boats' infamous wolf-pack tactics, and tailor-made them for the local circumstances.[28] The Sea Tigers consequently began to prepare for offensive operations by closely observing the SLN waterjets' operation patterns before unleashing their own attacks, well prepared in advance and designed to counter the IPC tactics, which usually involved them patrolling in line to expand their detection range while tracking LTTE convoys. The Sea Tigers deployed multiple radar stations along the coast, all connected to their communication centre. Once these had detected an enemy patrol craft formation, between eight and 10 Sea Tiger boats, prepositioned near the coast, were launched to intercept. These packs included between six and eight attack craft and two suicide boats. Once at sea, and still tightly controlled by the land-based headquarters, they moved in an arrow-shape formation, intending to break through the enemy line before turning back to engage the waterjets from every direction. In the resulting confusion, the two suicide craft were to land the decisive blow by ramming enemy ships and igniting their explosive charges.

Whilst – in theory – these tactics could be devastating, it took months for the Sea Tigers to perfect them. Indeed, SLN losses initially remained much smaller than those of the Sea Tigers, but the insurgents' maritime arm was beginning to extract a heavier toll. In the meantime, the SL Navy also adapted its tactics, sometimes attempting to lure a Sea Tigers pack into a specific area carefully pre-registered by the Army's artillery. It was only in late August 1993 that the wolf-pack tactic began to pay off. On the 22nd of that month, SLN waterjets had gained another success by intercepting a LTTE convoy and destroying several boats – as usual, without loss. On the night of 26 August, five waterjets left the Nagathevanthurai base for another convoy-intercept operation. This time, however, they were engaged by a swarm of Sea Tigers, and in the ensuing melee, two Black Sea Tigers managed to ram *P115* and *P121*, sinking both of them. However, on 1 September, during another engagement, an IPC avoided the same fate by sinking a suicide-craft attempting to close in on it. Nonetheless, by then, the Nagathevanthurai Detachment had the reputation as the most dangerous assignment one could get in the whole Sri Lankan Navy.[29]

Yet the SLN drew its own lessons from the Kilali lagoon battles, which triggered the creation of a new unit, the Special Boat Squadron (SBS). In early January 1993, 44 sailors and officers began their training, which ended in September, as explained by the outfit's first CO, Lieutenant Commander Ravindra C. Wijegunaratne:

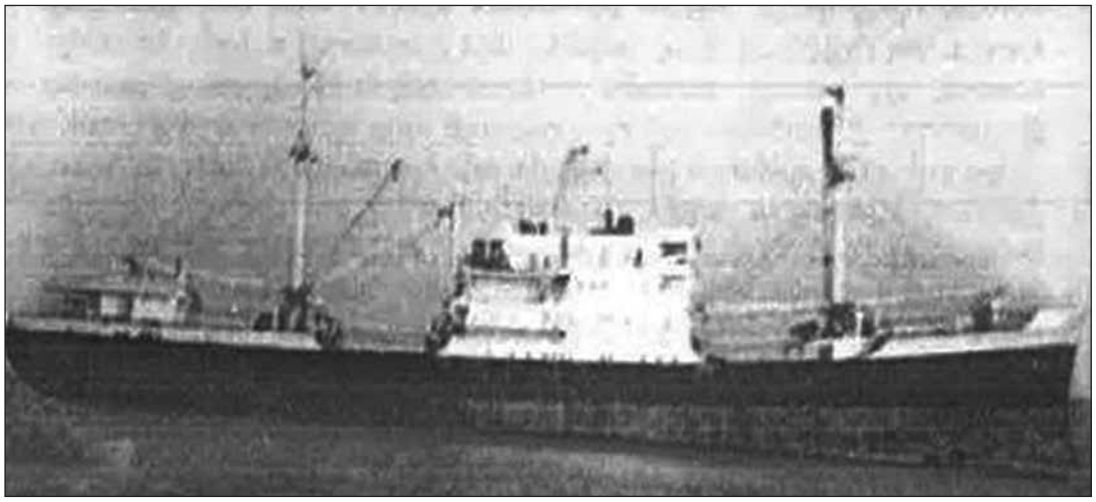
> On January 18, 1993, at Fort Hammenhiel, Karainagar, two officers and forty-two sailors, all volunteers from the Navy, underwent a special training to start a new unit known as the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) or the Naval Commando Unit. The SBS was formed to fight LTTE Sea Tigers in lagoons and waterways. Our training also focused on attacks behind the enemy lines to destroy Sea Tiger installations. Britain's Royal Marines Special Boat Squadron was our model. I was fortunate enough to command this unit and train my men to be the 'Bravest of the Brave' in the Navy. I was a young Lieutenant Commander at that time and my Second-in-Command was an officer more than 12 years junior and younger than me. He was Acting Sub Lieutenant Samantha Waruna Gallage from Dehiwala. An excellent swimmer and a fearless fighter, Samantha was also an excellent boat handler and a top marksman.
>
> We trained together for eight months in the Karainagar lagoon with the intention of taking over boat operations in the Jaffna lagoon from our small detachment at Nagadevannturai.[30]

However, the SBS completed its training too late to take part in the numerous sea engagements in the lagoon before the LTTE struck its own decisive blow.

### Last journey of the *Sagarawardene*

Since the resumption of the war, the 330-tonners SLNS *Jayasagera* (*P601*) and SLNS *Sagarawardene* (*P602*) – the SLN's only real offshore patrol vessels – had conducted ceaseless patrols close to or off the Sri Lankan coast. They had also been used as SIGINT platforms to monitor enemy radio traffic. On 18 September 1994, SLNS *Sagarawardene* left anchor off Colombo to escort several inshore patrol craft to the Kalpitiya naval base, where it arrived around midday. It than left alone for an independent mission, and that evening dropped anchor off the coast to eavesdrop on enemy radio communications. However, the Sea Tigers were waiting for just such an opportunity and prepared an attack against the vessel led by no less than Soosai, their commander. In turn, the Sea Tigers' radio exchanges tipped off the SLN intelligence, who warned the *Sagarawardene*'s skipper, Commander Ajith Boyagoda, that "something was in the air". Accordingly, the ship left anchor, moved away from the coast and sailed back to Kalpitiya, spoiling the Sea Tigers' preparations. Nevertheless, correctly guessing that their own radio traffic had betrayed them, the Sea Tigers imposed

A typical fast attack craft of the LTTE's Sea Tigers in the first half of the 1990s: note the radar (under the white dome) and heavy armament, including one 7.62mm PK-series light machine gun and a pair of 12.7mm DShK heavy machine guns. (LTTE release)



One of the SLN Command and Surveillance ships. These became highly vulnerable once the Sea Tigers began to use suicide boats, and thus needed to be heavily escorted at all times. (LTTE Release)

**Table 11: SLN Losses, 1990–94**[34]

| Date | Ship | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| 2 September 1991 | *P143* | Inshore patrol craft; sunk by sea mine |
| 3 February 1992 | *P118* | Inshore patrol craft; sunk by sea mine |
| 30 August 1992 | *P166* | Inshore patrol craft; captured by the LTTE |
| 26 February 1993 | *P119* | Inshore patrol craft; sunk by sea mine |
| 26–27 August 1993 | *P115* | Inshore patrol craft; sunk during naval battle |
| 26–27 August 1993 | *P121* | Inshore patrol craft; sunk during naval battle |
| 29 August 1993 | *P464* | Dvora-class FAC, sunk by Sea Black Tiger suicide attack |
| 16 August 1994 | *A516* | Surveillance & Command ship, sunk by UDT while at anchor |
| 17 August 1994 | *Dheera* | Tug boat sunk by UDT while at anchor |
| 19 September 1994 | *Sagarawardene* | Offshore patrol vessel, sunk by Sea Black Tiger suicide attack |

total radio silence, which deceived the Navy into concluding that the enemy had abandoned their plot.

Meanwhile, on 19 September, the *Sagarawardene* was escorting smaller boats from Kalpitiya to Mannar Island when one of its two main engines suffered from overheating and had to be turned off. The ship continued its voyage, progressing to Mannar and dropping anchor near the coast – in an ideal position to monitor LTTE radio traffic. This time, the Sea Tigers readied their attack in a matter of hours, and without raising any suspicion. Realising that they were unlikely to deal a fatal blow, they aimed to merely immobilise the *Sagarawardene* with a suicide diver, thereby exposing it to subsequent attack by suicide craft manned by two female Sea Black Tigers of the Mani Arasan Padai Ani.[31] The skipper described the assault that ultimately doomed his command:

> My Executive Officer was on the eight to midnight watch, and then I would take over the next watch […] There was a bright moon that night and it lit the sea immediately around us […] I woke up again because I had been thrown out of bed by something. The clock in my cabin showed the time as 23.20hrs. I rushed up to the bridge, thinking we had run aground on the reef […]
>
> Coming up on to the bridge on the starboard side-wing I looked back. I saw the whole stern of the ship had been ripped off. There was no stern at all. The ship was taking in huge quantities of water and appeared to be sinking […] The explosion had also knocked out our generator power […] We had four main armaments on board. One gun was ripped off; the other forward gun – a 25 millimetre gun – couldn't be operated without power. So I only had two manually operated 5-zero-50 calibre guns on the two wings […] we managed to fire at one of the oncoming LTTE boats. It exploded before it reached us. But there was another boat. Our rounds were ricocheting off this second boat, which suggested it had armour plating. Just as we connected the batteries to the radio to try and raise the shore, the boat rammed us, causing the next explosion. With the second explosion the ship caught fire. It started sinking rapidly.[32]

In the aftermath of the attack, Commander Boyagoda was captured by the Sea Tigers, along with several other sailors. Although not executed, he was imprisoned for several years. According to the SLN, the Navy rescued 18 out of the 45 crew, while another 20 were missing, two were classified as killed in action and the others captured by the enemy. The loss of the *Sagarawardene* came as a rude shock: not only was it one of the largest ships lost in the war so far, but the two locally built offshore patrol craft were a source of pride throughout the service.[33]

# 7
# LEAP FROG

Meanwhile, back on land, the LTTE managed to seize the initiative again in late July 1993 by attacking the Janakapura camp in the Weli Oya area, defended by elements of the 8th SLLI. The assault took place in the middle of the night of 23/24 July, when the Tigers simultaneously attacked the main camp in the village of the same name and a company-sized position atop a nearby hill. For good measure, two diversionary attacks were staged at the same time against the Kokkutuduwai and Kovil Point camps. In just a few hours, the insurgents managed to overwhelm the Janakapura camp, killing one officer and 23 soldiers, while another 31 were wounded and 20 subsequently declared as missing in action. The Tigers withdrew before dawn, carrying a huge stock of weapons and ammunition, worth 50 million LKR. To add insult to injury, they used two captured bulldozers to destroy the camp, before burning both vehicles. The defeat sent shockwaves through the Sri Lankan Army, especially as a court of inquiry subsequently concluded that the camp's security had grown lax over time, which had considerably eased the insurgents' task.[1]

The LTTE also launched several harassment attacks all around the Jaffna/Kilali lagoon, using small teams of infantrymen carried by Sea Tigers' boats. Several locations along the coasts of Kayts and Mandaithivu islands were targeted, while signal intelligence reported that the insurgents were running landing exercises in the lagoon itself, honing their ability to combine their naval and infantry formations. Obviously, something was in the air. Furthermore, a vexing problem for the government forces remained their inability to seal the Kilali lagoon to LTTE sea traffic, despite the increasingly violent naval engagements taking place there. Eventually, the Army was instructed to launch a pre-emptive attack from Elephant Pass to seize Kilali harbour, 18km away, and destroy the LTTE infrastructure there, which would have the added benefit of stealing the initiative from the insurgents and thus thwart the offensive they were obviously preparing.

## Operation Yal Devi

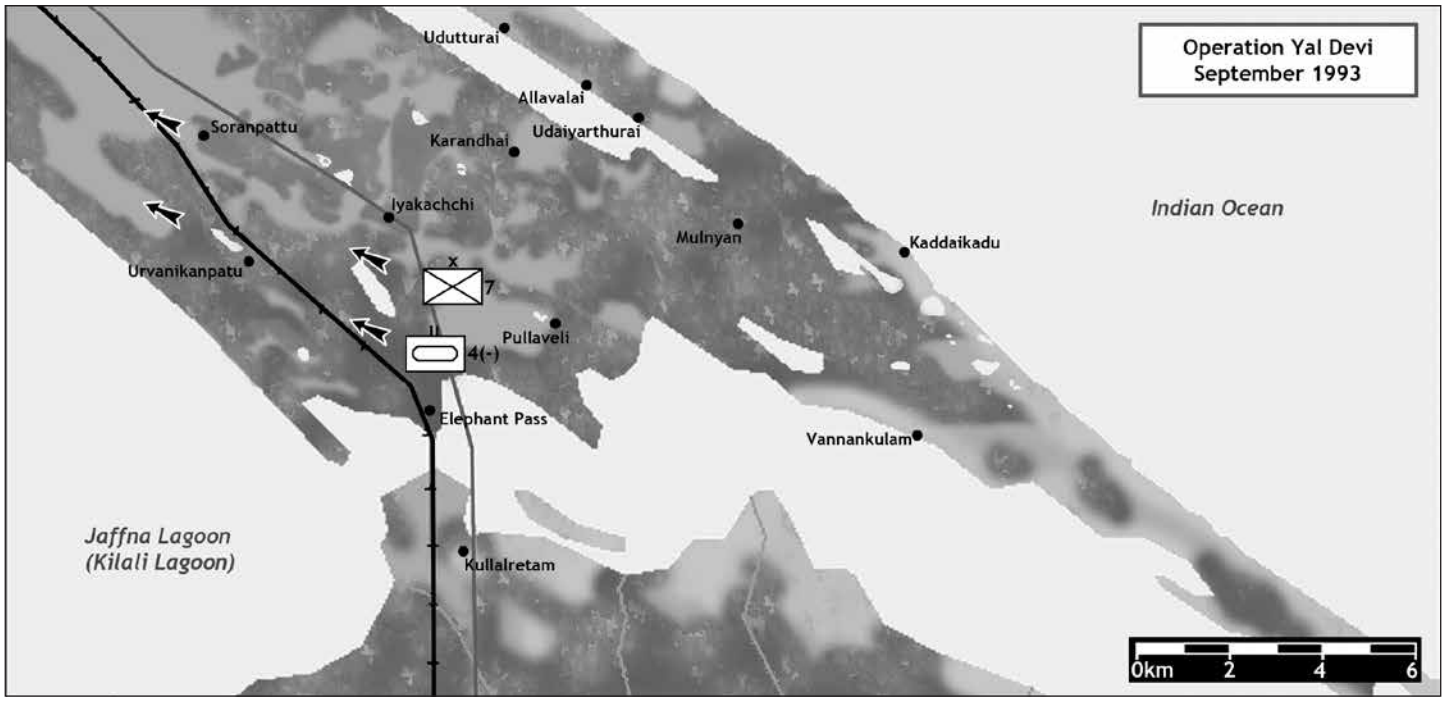
For this task, the SLA initially envisioned a brigade-sized operation with three infantry battalions, but upon reviewing this assessment it opted for an almost division-seized venture. Accordingly, six infantry battalions, supported by virtually all the T-55s the 4 SLAC could muster – 20 tanks operated in its B and C Squadrons – were concentrated in Elephant Pass. The force could also rely on several artillery batteries, as well as the usual SLAF support. A pair each of Pucaras and F-7s and four SF.260TPs were earmarked for the operation, as were two Mi-17s and three Bell 212s. The task force was placed under the overall command of Brigadier Wansatha Perera and organised in three Brigade Groups: the 1st (CO Colonel Santha, Kottegoda, 6th SLLI and 7th SLLI), the 2nd (CO Colonel Sarath Fonseka, 1st Sinha and 7th Sinha) and the 3rd (CO Colonel Sarath Munasinghe, 3rd SLLI and 6th Gemunu Watch).[2]

## A melée in the box

The offensive began on the morning of 28 September 1993, with the SLA troops advancing between the coast and the Yal Devi railway line – hence the name of the operation. The six battalions advanced in a massive box formation, with two battalions in front and two on each flank. The box was intended to advance all the way to Kilali, without losing troops to hold the land line of communication separating it from Elephant Pass. All went well during the first day of the offensive: except for a few skirmishes, the advance went unopposed. However, all hell broke loose on the second day, as recalled by Colonel Sarath Munasinghe, CO of the 3rd Brigade:

> As planned, troops commenced their advance on 28 September 1993. Armour, artillery and the Air Force supported each Brigade consisting of two infantry battalions. By 17.00hrs the leading troops reached the Phase-I line, 9 km from EPS. There was only one confrontation, where 37 soldiers received minor injuries. We harboured for the night wherever we were. I was at the tail end with my Brigade. The Brigade Commander for Phase-II spelt out

An IA.58 Pucara of the SLAF (registration CA-604), ready for take-off. It has five fully loaded pods for unguided rockets. (SLAF)




A map depicting the basic concept of Operation Yal Devi, launched in September 1993. (Map by Tom Cooper)

The rear side of a typical LTTE bunker. This usually consisted of logs stacked on top of each other, covered by additional logs for overhead protection. The front side was heavily camouflaged with scrub and even discarded items such as car tyres. (LTTE release)

his requirement to start off [at the] latest by 07.30hrs the following day. Maybe he was overconfident. We did not have sufficient time to re-group. I could move forward only one Battalion of my Brigade to secure the right flank. However, the advance re-commenced. By 08.30 on 29 September 1993 we came under heavy enemy fire forcing us to halt the advance. We had advanced only about 500 meters and the frontage was very narrow. We were engaged from the front, western, and eastern flanks. The leading Battalion was in total disarray. Troops came under a severe mortar attack, simultaneously. On the western flank I could observe troops, running back to safety. 120 mm mortars were hurriedly dismantled and taken away.

The GOC, who was on the ground, with a helicopter waiting, took off immediately, instructing the Task Force Commander over the radio to take control. That, in my experience, was a drama. I saw tractors loaded with stuff, speeding toward the rear. We held on to our flank amidst mortar and small arms fire. The Brigade Commander, who was leading the Task Force, held on with a few brave soldiers. He was using harsh words at others, but held on. I had several casualties in my brigade due to enemy mortar fire. By early afternoon, on 29 September 1993, we had 7 officers and 105 soldiers killed. Seventeen officers and 182 soldiers were wounded. Most of the casualties were due to mortar fire. Two Main Battle Tanks were burning.[3]

What happened was that, as usual, LTTE intelligence knew all about the coming offensive. However, the movement's leadership misunderstood Yal Devi as an attempt to occupy and hold the whole western coast of the Jaffna Peninsula, from Elephant Pass to at least Chavakachcheri, thus cutting off the insurgents in the peninsula from the outside world by denying them access to the Kilali lagoon. There had been no time to construct field fortifications and minefields along the enemy axis of advance, but it had to be opposed at all cost. Accordingly, one company each of the Charles Anthony Padai Ani, Imran Pandian Padai Ani and Jaffna regional command, between 450 and 500 fighters in total, under Balraj, Sornam and Tamilshelvan respectively, were rushed to face the SLA thrust. Crucially, virtually all the 60mm and 81mm mortars attached to these Padai Ani went with them. On 29 September, these three units took part in a textbook 'battle of infiltration' in the Pallai area. First, a screen of no more

The commander and loader of an SLA T-55 carefully monitor terrain in front of them during an advance. On the commander's cupola is the trace of a direct hit by an RGP-7 round. Clearly visible is the anti-RPG basket around the turret – used to store additional boxes of ammunition and supplies. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

than 50 fighters established a series of carefully camouflaged and buried firing positions, each held by one or two combatants. These were ordered to, literally, 'do or die' where they were. This was no empty rhetoric: standard LTTE practice for fighters engaged in such mission was to tie their legs with ropes or chains to prevent them from withdrawing. This skirmisher line was, however, no more than a decoy intended to attract the enemy's attention toward the front. Soon after the advancing army forces met with the skirmish line, multiple insurgent infantry teams attempted to penetrate the SLA box, while the mortars pounded it – triggering a fierce, day-long battle. This shocked the army, which lost seven officers and 108 soldiers KIA that day, whilst at least 200 others – including 2nd Brigade CO Colonel Sarath Fonseka – were wounded. The SLAF helicopters spent the day flying constant CASEVAC sorties, instead of providing fire support: a single Bell 212 flew 59 such sorties in a matter of 24 hours, extracting 120 wounded troops and 30 bodies.

The LTTE then introduced new tactics to deal with the SLA's tanks – inspired by little other than what they saw in war movies: a small group of fighters would sneak up on the tanks, climb on them and throw grenades down their hatches. This resulted in two T-55s being destroyed, four crewmen injured and four killed.[4]

However, the 29 September battle was no triumph for the LTTE either. On the contrary, the companies involved were almost annihilated in the process, losing around 200 KIA and another 200 wounded. Among the injured were Tamilchelvan, and Balraj, both suffering from leg injuries – which invalided the former for the rest of his life. Indeed, the Tigers took such a beating that they had no other units to further oppose the Yal Devi operation – although the reason for this became apparent only two months later. The SLA task force, despite its setback, was now free to continue its advance toward Kilali, which it reached on 1 October. As well as destroying several bases vacated by the insurgents, the Sri Lankan Army troops destroyed hundreds of small boats there before they withdraw to Elephant Pass a few days later. Yal Devi thus ended in a clear-cut victory, but anything but a decisive one: it temporarily disrupted the LTTE sea road connecting Jaffna and the Vanni, and inflicted heavy losses on the Tigers, but the Kilali shuttle was nonetheless up and running again just days after the SLA vacated the area.[5]

## A vulnerable base

The reason behind the series of less-than-discreet LTTE hit-and-run operations on various SLA positions all around the Kilaly lagoon was the insurgents' intention, almost ever since the camp was established in October 1991, to deal a massive blow to the Pooneryn base. By launching these small attacks, the LTTE was not only honing its skills in combined sea-land operations, but also kept the enemy guessing about where the real '*Schwerpunkt*' lay. Meanwhile, the Tigers' intelligence apparatus had focused its sights on Pooneryn, using all the means available – from SIGINT to spies – until it had an extremely detailed picture about the enemy dispositions there. On several occasions, army patrols detected and killed enemy scouts within the camp who had been meticulously sketching their positions and noting their routines. The retrieval of some abandoned rigi-foam near the beaches gave away the insurgent scouts' favourite method of infiltration: they simply swam across the lagoon at night before crawling between SLA bunkers and finding a suitable hiding place.[6]

It turned out that the base's defensive dispositions were plagued by multiple deficiencies – all of them courting disaster. While the most crucial infrastructure – the Nagathewanthurai naval detachment – and the Pooneryn town and its crossroads were enclosed, it was also necessary to include in the base perimeter the entire peninsula connecting the town to Kalmunai Point, which was used as an unloading spot for the Navy LCMs tasked with resupplying the camp. In turn, this meant that the main camp covered an area of 27km$^2$, while the defensive perimeter was 29km long. However, the garrison itself was relatively small. Aside from the 300 SLN sailors and officers attached to the naval detachment, it included only two infantry battalions, the 1st SLLI (CO Colonel Ranjith Silva) and the 3rd Gajaba (CO Major Lalith Daulagala), a four-tube 120mm mortar battery of the 7th Artillery Regiment and a pair of T-55s of the 4 SLAC – 1,500 men in total at most. Unsurprisingly, the strongest part of the defensive perimeter was that facing the Vanni mainland, but this meant that the shore areas were only lightly held, with the defence line being anything but continuous. On the contrary, in some areas facing the Kilali lagoon there was merely one bunker every 400 metres, while the single SLA company securing Kalmunai Point had to cover 8km with its 114 men. Furthermore, the garrison included 285 freshly recruited soldiers who had been sent to Pooneryn straight after completing their basic training, while there was no coordination between the two infantry battalions and the naval detachment. Finally, the infantry battalions were attached to and reported to a Brigade Headquarters sited in Velanai, on Kayts Island. Because of this catastrophic arrangement, there was simply no united command for the base.[7]

## Thavalai

Once Iperation Yal Devi ended, the LTTE was once again free to resume preparations for its own strike. Codenamed Operation

Leap Frog (*Thavalai*), this was planned under conditions of utmost secrecy, with a ban on any radio transmissions related to what was to turn into the most complex venture so far undertaken by the insurgents. Velupillai Prabhakaran oversaw the whole operation himself, supported by Pottu Amman, the Intelligence Wing commander, who acted as chief coordinator. In turn, the forces intended for the Pooneryn attack were organised in two distinct fronts, the Jaffna and Vanni.

The Vanni Front was to launch a ground assault from the mainland. For this, three companies from the Vanni regional command were mobilised, led by Theepan, a rising star of the military wing and Vanni regional commander. These were reinforced by three companies of the newly raised Jeyanthan Padai Ani, whose fighters had just completed their training, under Karuna Amman. Several mortar batteries offered support, making a total of at least 1,000 fighters. However, the main blow was to come from the Jaffna Front, which provided three companies of fighters, one each from the Charles Anthony Padai Ani, the Imran Pandian Padai Ani and the Jaffna regional command, directly led by Balraj, Sornam and Bhanu respectively. These were to operate in close coordination with the Sea Tigers and assault the vulnerable flank of the Pooneryn base. Thanks to the extensive intelligence gathered previously, all these units had received extremely detailed plans, with the intention of crushing the camp by launching multiple and simultaneous assaults – all targeting identified weak spots in the enemy forward defence line. There was also an emphasis to capture as many weapons as possible. Furthermore, while this was to be a night attack, it was unlikely that the battle would be over by dawn. Hence, several HMGs and their crews from the Radha unit were kept ready to interdict resupply flights by SLAF helicopters – while the heavy and low cloud cover endemic during the monsoon was to mitigate the effects of the SLAF air strikes. To further confuse the enemy, one final deception operation was initiated: the 'Captain Miller' unit dispatched a Black Tigers team to infiltrate the Palali complex and attack the air base at the outset of the offensive against Pooneryn.[8]

An SF.260TP (registration CT-123) and IA.58 Pucara (registration CA-604) of the SLAF in flight. Both were photographed while armed with pods for 68mm unguided rockets. (SLAF)

The attack was launched at around 0100 hours on 11 November, after around 100 insurgents had successfully swum across the lagoon, using rigi-foam and carrying their weapons in watertight bags, and infiltrated the SLA bunker line near Kalmunai Point. While the infiltration party attacked the enemy from behind, the Vanni Front assaulted the southern defensive line and the Sea Tigers unleashed another major blow directed against the Nagathewanthurai naval base. A pair of Black Sea Tigers suicide-boats rushed toward the base pier before to detonate their bombloads, triggering massive explosions and forcing the seamen near the pier to withdraw. In the wake of the Black Sea Tigers, other Sea Tiger boats rushed to the pier and unloaded two companies of fighters, who immediately began to invest the camp. Confronted in pitch darkness with such a sudden and multipronged attack, the garrison's resistance crumbled. Company headquarters fell one after the other, as did the 3rd Gajaba Battalion headquarters. The insurgents also captured the two T-55s, and the waterjets *P114*, *P120* and *P123*, while two other craft were destroyed. The heavy mortar battery was also invested, and two 120mm tubes were taken, before the Tigers were expelled by a counterattack from the 1st SLLI. Despite the chaos, a number of soldiers managed to withdraw toward the HQ of the 1st SLLI, where the battalion's officers managed to reorganise a new defensive perimeter measuring 500 metres by 500 metres.[9]

The SLAF reacted swiftly during the night. At 0220 hours, the first helicopter was dispatched over the camp, and its crew soon reported the loss of the naval base. The Air Force then scrambled one Pucara and one SF.260TP, along with all the available Bell 212 gunships, which flew a series of airstrikes around the base. At dawn, the F-7s from No.5 Squadron were also scrambled from Katunayake AB, launching a series of bombing runs over Pooneryn. At this stage, the insurgents were busy evacuating their booty from the area – including the prized pair of T-55s. The LTTE had even trained several fighters to drive the tanks beforehand, using mock-up wooden simulators. An SLAF aircraft sighted one of the T-55s moving away from the base and destroyed it.

At that point, as expected by the LTTE, the weather impeded the SLAF airstrikes. Low cloud cover forced the pilots to fly at low altitude, and one Pucara was hit by HMG fire in mid-morning, injuring the pilot, Flight Lieutenant Danwatta, in the leg. Despite his wound, Danwatta managed to nurse the aircraft back to Palali AB and land safely there. The Radha unit anti-aircraft fire also impeded the SLAF drops of ammunition and medical supplies over the 1st SLLI HQ, with the bulk of the cargoes falling into insurgent hands instead. Perhaps worst of all, the first rescue mission that day failed due to enemy fire: several Bell 212s and Mi-17s carrying reinforcements had to abort when one of the helicopters was hit by a 12.7mm HMG in the vicinity of the intended LZ. Nevertheless, the helicopters did manage to rescue dozens of sailors from the naval base, who had escaped by slowly wading across the lagoon. The insurgents sighted

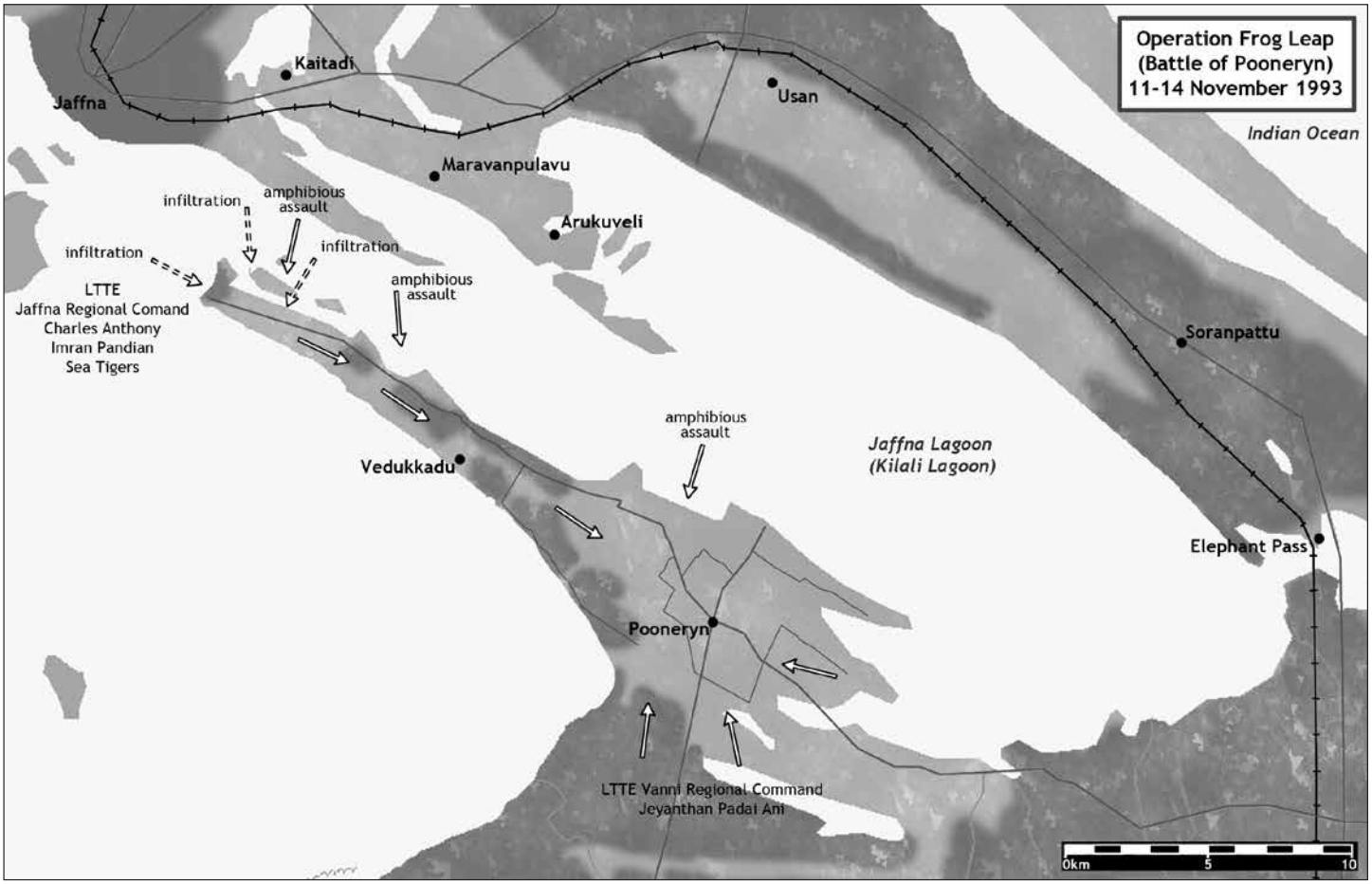
them and dispatched several Sea Tigers boats to deal with them, but the helicopters rescued around 50 of the sailors, while Pucaras and SF.260TPs engaged the vessels, claiming to have sunk two of them.

## Landing operation

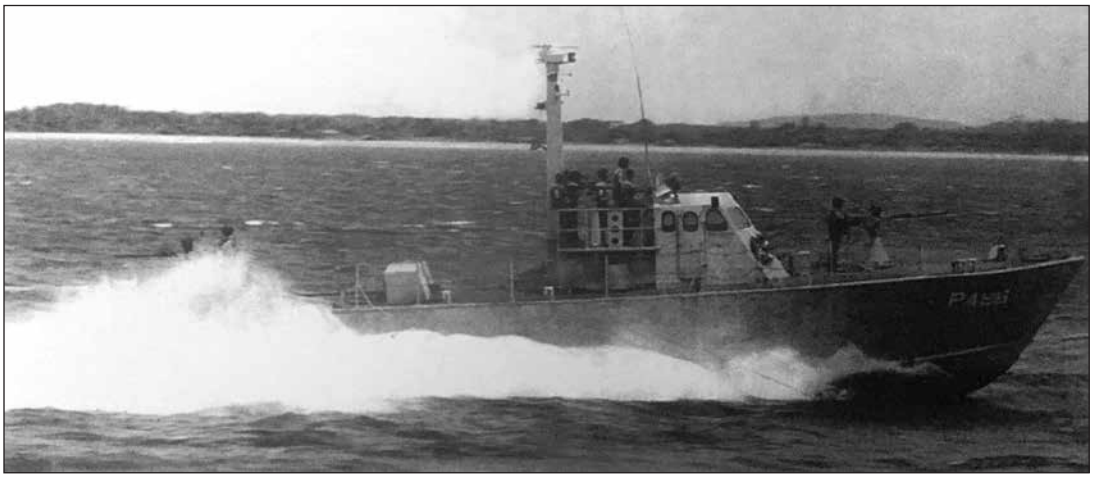
The following night, the insurgents launched an assault against the remaining small perimeter held by the soldiers, but failed to break through, with the SLAF flying a number of CAS sorties to help their beleaguered comrades. A new combined-force rescue operation took place on 12 November, when two Navy LCMs escorted by gun boats and Fast Attack Craft attempted to land an infantry battalion at Kalmunai Point. However, knowing that the place was the sole practicable landing spot for LCMs in the area, the Tigers had set defensive positions along the coast and targeted the approaching ships with sustained fire, while two suicide-boats also made an appearance. This proved enough to force the Navy to withdraw its ships. In the meantime, a second attempt to land reinforcements by helicopter had to be aborted because of intense anti-aircraft fire.[10]

By 13 November, the government forces had reorganised themselves and initiated a new – better-organised – rescue operation. An SLN task force under Commander Sarath Weerasekera – centred on the LCMs SLNS *Pabbatha* and SLNS *Ranagaja*, carrying 700 men from the Commando Regiment and 4th SLLI, escorted by the Fast Gun Boats SLNS *Ranarasi*, SLNS *Weeraya* and SLNS *Sooraya*, as well as the FAC *P453*, *P454*, *P463*, *P465*, *P468* and *P475* – sailed again for Kalmunai Point. This time, the monsoon played into the Navy's hand instead of the insurgents', as the approach of the task force was shielded by fog and heavy rain. Once off the landing point, the warships pounded suspected enemy positions, as did SLAF aircraft, before the launch of what turned out to be the first SBS combat operation, as recalled by its CO, Lieutenant Commander Ravindra C. Wijegunaratne:

A still from a video showing one of the T-55s captured by the LTTE at Pooneryn being proudly paraded by the insurgents. (LTTE release)




A map of the LTTE's Operation Leap Frog, which resulted in the destruction of SLA and SLN bases in the Pooneryn area in November 1993. (Map by Tom Cooper)



The Dvora Mk.1 *P468*, moving at high speed, with a 20mm Oerlikon gun installed forward of the bridge. This was the FAC that engaged and sank one of the Black Sea Tiger attack craft during Operation Leap Frog on 13 November 1993. (SLAF)

**Table 12: SLAF Activity during Operation Leap Frog, 11–17 November 1993[15]**

| Aircraft | Flight Time | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| IA.58 Pucara | 36.50 hrs | |
| SF.260TP | 70.20 hrs | |
| Bell 212 | 132.10 hrs | Carried 141 passengers and 2 tonnes of cargo; evacuated 221 casualties |
| Mi-17 | 39.27 hrs | Carried 1,217 passengers and 18 tonnes of cargo; evacuated 162 casualties |

> As there was no possibility to reinforce the besieged Army Complex from the air, military commanders decided to send in reinforcement through an amphibious landing. My unit SBS, the brand-new Naval Special Force, was tasked to carry out the first wave of landings […] Enemy obstacles and gun positions were there to slow down your advance and there was a 90 percent probability of getting killed or injured during this crossing. Orders were issued; Samantha [the SBS second-in-command] and I were commanding two Inshore Patrol Craft (commonly known as Water Jets) which carried fifteen Commandos each, followed by fiberglass boats carrying six Commandos each. My orders were very clear to Samantha. I told him that I would land first because I wanted to assess the situation. Navy gunboats started bombarding the beach early morning with their 37mm guns, and we were given clearance to do the landing with the lull of heavy gunfire. Our two Water Jets raced towards Pooneryn beach. Two enemy machine guns started firing towards us and suddenly Samantha increased the speed of his Water Jet and landed first and nullified enemy machine gun positions with his grenade launchers. I was very angry with Samantha. My orders were very clear as I told him that I would be landing first. However, I was happy that he destroyed the enemy gun positions in quick succession with no casualties to us. The landing was successful and we established the beachhead for our landing craft to beach and reinforcements poured in.[11]

The first wave landed 64 commandos, who swiftly secured the beachhead, allowing the rest of the troops to land safely. In the meantime, SLAF helicopters brought a further 400 men from the 3rd SLLI and 6th Gemunu Watch. Aside from the two machine-gun positions, the only enemy resistance to the whole operation came from a single Black Sea Tiger craft that was engaged and sunk by *P468*. Indeed, by then, the insurgents had already begun to withdraw from Pooneryn so as not to repeat their mistakes during the Elephant Pass battle by trying to overrun an enemy garrison at all costs while facing an enemy counter-offensive. Hence, only landmines delayed the commandos and infantrymen during their advance from Kalmunai Point to Pooneryn town, where they linked up with the beleaguered remains of the garrison early on the afternoon of 14 November. The SLAF aircraft continued to fly numerous interdiction missions, as well as a relentless campaign against all suspected enemy rear-bases in the Jaffna Peninsula until 17 November.[12]

While in the end they remained in possession of the crucial Pooneryn area, the battle was a devastating blow for the government forces, inflicting upon them so far unheard-of casualties in a single engagement. Eight officiers and 225 soldiers or sailors were listed as KIA, with 302 others missing in action – almost certainly killed too, but without friendly forces retrieving their bodies. A further 561 soldiers or sailors had been wounded. Material losses were equally heavy, with five inshore patrol craft, two tanks and at least two heavy mortars destroyed. The capture of one T-55 by the insurgents proved a heavy symbolic blow, while the SLAF had proven unable to reverse the course of the battle, despite an extremely high number of sorties. Lieutenant General Cecil Waidyaratne, the SLA commander, resigned in the aftermath of the battle, to be replaced by Lieutenant General Gerry de Silva from 1 January 1994.[13]

For the LTTE, Operation Leap Frog closed the evolutionary loop which had begun during the battle at Elephant Pass two years earlier, when the insurgency battered itself against the enemy camp. It was the first time that the insurgents came close to annihilating an almost brigade-sized enemy force. The booty taken was significant, with the capture of long-sought-after equipment such as three waterjets, one T-55 and a pair of 120mm mortars. However, this success had not come cheap – the movement later admitted to having lost 459 KIA during the battle, including 91 men from the Jenayanthan Padai Ani alone. Despite these losses, the conclusion is clear that the complete reshuffle of their doctrine and tactics from the second half of 1991 had made the Tigers a much more deadly foe.[14]

# 8
# SHADOW WARFARE

A decisive factor that made the LTTE such a dangerous foe can be described in a single word: intelligence. This cannot be over-emphasised, as virtually from the outset, the Tigers went to great lengths to collect as much information about their enemy as they possibly could; over the years, they created dedicated structures that were at least on a par with – if not superior to – those of nation-states in terms of capabilities and sheer professionalism. In turn, these very capabilities time and again provided the movement with a decisive edge on the battlefield.[1]

## Rise of the Intelligence Wing

The LTTE formally activated its own Intelligence Wing in 1986 by merging BETA-2 – a small intelligence outfit already in existence – with another intelligence cell activated in Jaffna around a small core of militants who had previously been trained by the Indian Research & Analysis Wing.[2] Pottu Amman, an old hand of the movement, became the head of the Intelligence Wing soon thereafter, and in turn reported directly to Velupillai Prabhakaran.

Surprisingly, a batch of around 30 militants also went to Israel in the mid-1980s, where they received training in infiltration techniques, communication, mine laying and ship sabotage. Even more stunning is that this took place simultaneously with the training in Israel of Sri Lankan operators in counter-terrorism tactics. Mossad operators went to great lengths in making certain that the two teams of trainees never met with each other.[3] However, Israel and India were not the only known sources of foreign expertise for the LTTE Intelligence Wing. In the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in mid-1991, and the breakdown of links between the LTTE and New Delhi, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) also provided training and manuals to its LTTE counterparts.

The 1989 peace deal between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE proved decisive for the subsequent fortunes of the Intelligence Wing: suddenly, its operatives were free to roam in central and southern Sri Lanka, creating the basis for a network of informants and safe houses. Over time, this underground network was built to between four and six cells of field agents (*Velikkala Muhavarhal*), each of which was supervised by a principal agent (*Pirathhana Muhavar*) – either directly or via an intermediary (*Idainilaiyaalar*). All of these were carefully trained in espionage, while their clandestine structure was tightly compartmentalised: even members of the same cell did not know each other. The underground network proved extremely resilient and was never fully neutralised by Sri Lankan counterintelligence and security services. In turn, the LTTE's secret operatives proved able not only to routinely organise assassinations or attacks – even in the capital – but also to recruit a number of well-placed Sinhalese informants, including among the armed forces.[4]

Gradually, the LTTE Intelligence Wing created five main departments. The Collection Department under Kapil Amman became responsible for HUMINT collection (human intelligence, i.e. information gathered from agents) and agent handling. In turn, this controlled five different desks, including one for internal security and another for counterintelligence. A second department, the Research and Publications Department under Mathavan Master, was tasked with publishing reports, based on HUMINT and its own databases or libraries. The Special Operation Division was the 'Black Ops' Wing outfit, tasked with assassinations, PSY-OPS (psychological warfare and propaganda) and sabotage operations. As such, it controlled the Wing's dedicated Black Tigers squad – which, contrary to other Black Tigers units, never benefited from any publicity. Finally, there was a Training and Technology Department and an Administration and Records Department. The Intelligence Wing also developed a Women's Wing. Altogether, it could have had as many as 1,500 men and women operating under its aegis – temporary 'helpers' included – and its tentacles covered not only Sri Lanka, but virtually all the Tamil communities abroad.

What made the Intelligence Wing infamous were the numerous assassinations it committed. Usually, the targeted individuals were selected in utmost secrecy by Velupillai Prabhakaran and Pottu Amman: essentially, targets were selected as soon as they were assessed a 'threat' – actual or potential – to the movement. Influential Tamil politicians were thus routinely assassinated, as they represented a potential political alternative for the Tamil population, while Sinhalese politicians considered as 'hardliners' – that is, committed to the LTTE's elimination – were also targets of choice. Talented enemy commanders figured high on the 'Black List' too. Assassinations were also used for psychological warfare; for instance, targeted officers received death threats – by phone calls or letters – months in advance of being killed in order to terrorise their fellow officers.

As detailed in volume two of this mini-series, the first high-profile assassinations came on 13 July 1989 with the murder of two Tamil MPs in Colombo. This was followed by the execution of virtually all of the EPRLF Central Committee by a hit squad in Madras on 19 June 1990. In between, the LTTE hitmen also assassinated several other Tamil politicians in the Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara districts.[5] On 2 March 1991, it was the turn of the Sri Lankan Deputy Defence Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, to be killed by a car bomb while he was going to his office in Colombo. A turning point came with Operation Wedding in May 1991, when the Intelligence Wing used a suicide-bomber for the first time to kill former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. On 22 June 1991, a Black Tiger was used again, this time in Colombo, to target the very heart of the Sri Lankan armed forces: an LTTE militant drove a vehicle filled with explosives into the

**Table 13: LTTE National Intelligence Wing (Pottu Amman)**

| Department | Directors |
|---|---|
| Collections Department, Thakaval Sekiatippu Pirivu | Kapi Amman |
| Research and Publications Department, Aaivu Mattrum Veliyeeddu Pirivu | Mathavan Master |
| Special Operations Division, Ellalan Padai | Janan Master |
| Training and Technology Department, Payitchi Mattrum Tholilnudpa Pirivu | Mathavan Master |
| Administration and Records, Nirvaakam Mattrum Arikkai Pirivu | Sankar |
| Women's Wing | Akila |

| Table 14: LTTE Military Intelligence Service (Sasikumar Master) | |
|---|---|
| **Department** | **Tamil name** |
| Collections Department SLA | Iranuva Thakaval Sekarippu Pirivu |
| Collections Department SLN | Kadatpadai Thakaval Sekarippu Pirivu |
| Collections Department SLAF | Vaanpadai Thakaval Sekarippu Pirivu |
| Administration and Records | Nirvaakam Mattrum Arikkai Pirivu |

Joint Operation Command Office, killing 21 people and wounding another 175.

Subsequently, suicide-bombers were to become the LTTE's trademark. The Navy Commander, Vice Admiral Clancy Fernando, died on 16 November 1992 when a suicide-bomber on a motorbike managed to ride unnoticed up to a small convoy escorting the Mercedes carrying the CO in the heart of Colombo. Once close to the rear of the Mercedes, where Fernando was seated, the Black Tiger activated his bomb, killing all aboard the car. On 23 April 1993, Lalith Athilathmuladi, a former National Security Minister running for the presidency, was killed by a gunman during a political meeting.[6] Seven days later, on 1 May 1993, a 23-year-old LTTE militant named Babu blew himself up during a May Day procession and killed Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa and 13 bystanders. This attack was the result of years of thorough preparation by the Intelligence Wing. Indeed, Babu managed to get sufficiently close to Premadasa before activating his suicide jacket only because he had befriended the presidential entourage since 1991, when he had bought a grocery ship close to the Presidential Residence precisely to gain the ability to interact with people working in the Presidency. As with the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, at least one dry run took place before the actual attack.[7]

## Military Intelligence

In the meantime, the LTTE also activated a Special Reconnaissance Team, the *Viseda Vevu Pitivu*, which was initially part of the Imran Pandian Padai Ani, and whose operators became known as Spy Tigers. This outfit specialised in long-range reconnaissance patrols and was akin to Special Forces units such as the 13th RDP (*Régiment de Dragons Parachutistes*, Parachute Dragoon Regiment) in France. It was overseen by Tinesh Master and Sasikumar Master and was instrumental in the death of Brigadier General Denzil Kobbekaduwa. In that case, SIGINT intercepts and LTTE agents in the Sri Lankan military got wind of the general's inspection schedule while he was touring Kayts Island as part of the ongoing preparations for the planned offensive against Jaffna. In turn, this crucial piece of intelligence allowed the insurgents to dispatch a Spy Tigers team to the island. These laid a small number of LTTE-designed landmines on the dirt road that the Sri Lankan officers had to take once they had completed their inspection of the troops located at Araly Point. At least two of the three Land Rovers that were part of the small convoy were destroyed by the mines, killing Kobbekaduwa and several other officers – and dealing a very heavy blow to the entire Sri Lankan war effort in the north.

Soon thereafter, the LTTE activated a second intelligence branch, the Military Intelligence Service, under Sasikumar Master. In turn, this new outfit was divided in three Collections Departments specialised in gathering intelligence about the Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Air Force, as well as an Administrative and Records Department. The Collection Departments gathered as much information as they could about the armed forces, using a mix of infiltrated agents, civilian observers, open source intelligence, radio intercepts, long-range reconnaissance patrols and even combat divers in the case of the SLN harbours. Over time, the Military Intelligence Service proved able to build orders of battle of enemy units, including the names of commanding officers even down to platoon level in the case of the SLA, while detailed models of almost every single Navy ship were built, as were models of SLAF bases and types of aircraft. A number of Sri Lankan military commanders were also kept under close scrutiny, with files established that included their addresses and travel habits. For instance, the file related to Vice Admiral Clancy Fernando was transmitted to the National Intelligence Wing once the decision to assassinate him had been taken. As it turned out, the main reason behind his killing was the ongoing negotiations between the SLN and its Indian counterpart to increase their cooperation in patrolling the seas around Sri Lanka

## Spy academy

Unsurprisingly, the creation of a second intelligence service did not go without causing rivalries in the movement's intelligence apparatus. The Military Intelligence leaders were sceptical about the National Intelligence Wing's assassinations and terrorist attacks, arguing that these would only compromise the LTTE's image in the public's eyes. However, this did not prevent the two branches from working closely together: both sent their high-level trainees to the same school located in Kalviyankadu, known as the LTTE Intelligence Training Centre (*Pulanaaivu Payitchi Maiyam*). Mathavan Master led the facility, which was also known as 'Base 22'.

Batches of 30 trainees at most were sent there to be taught the mysteries of intelligence work. Security measures were drastic in order to alleviate the risk of grouping all of the movement's future intelligence operatives together: all had a private hut at their disposal, and it was only there that they were allowed to remove the black mask they permanently wore. Furthermore, they were forbidden to interact with each other. Even aliases were not used for them, only numbers.

The training was extremely extensive, emphasising the ability to become principal agents for the movement, and thus handling undercover or sleeper agents operating outside of LTTE-held areas, as well as the art of military reconnaissance. High-ranking intelligence cadres, such as Janan Master, Sasikumar Master and even Pottu Amman, gave classes, while Mossad, ISI and RAW manuals were also heavily used. Even the movement's political strategies were taught by no less than Anthon Balasingham or Velupillai Balakumar, the LTTE supremo's political adviser and the former EROS leader turned LTTE political committee member respectively. The education was not only theoretical, as the would-be LTTE spies also practised interrogation techniques with real Sri Lankan prisoners, while the whole training programme ended with a formal exam.

## New Delhi's revenge

Thanks to this sophisticated intelligence apparatus, the LTTE held a major advantage over the Sri Lankan government, especially as the latter's intelligence-collecting efforts were plagued by a lack of coordination between its several intelligence and counter-terrorism services. Furthermore, the LTTE's use of the Tamil language – especially the Jaffna vernacular – complicated immensely the task of the security forces in this regard. However, by killing Rajiv Gandhi, the LTTE had unleashed onto itself the wrath of a much more

potent enemy – and the Indian intelligence service, while staying in the shadows, nonetheless almost succeeded in taking control of the Tigers. Indeed, according to no less than Tinesh Master himself, the LTTE walked for a time a very thin line, where any misstep would had proved fatal.

The Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) came into being in 1968, becoming the main Indian external intelligence agency. Less than three years after its creation, RAW began to be involved in paramilitary work when it began to support and train the Mukti Bahini, the Eastern Pakistan independence movement. It is thus hardly surprising that, once Prime Minister Indira Gandhi opted to support the Sri Lankan insurgents in 1983, RAW became the mastermind behind the establishment of several Tamil insurgent groups – including the LTTE. As a result, RAW supervised the training in India of dozens of LTTE militants, including one group in intelligence work and another in anti-aircraft tactics. Whilst making the most of the opportunity, the Tigers did not trust the Indians and prevented them as much as possible from gathering detailed intelligence about their organisation. Nonetheless, it was unavoidable that RAW had at least some detailed insight about the movement – indeed, some links were maintained between the intelligence agency and the LTTE during the whole IPKF episode.[8]

Perhaps the most significant achievement of RAW during this period was the recruitment in 1989 of no less than Gopalaswamy Mahendrarajah (alias Mathaya), the LTTE's 'Number 2', who had distinguished himself by leading the insurgents during the Jaffna battle against the IPKF in October 1987.[9] However, Mathaya was no mere mole feeding information: on the contrary, relations between RAW and the LTTE commander were much more akin to an alliance, as the latter could also rely on the former to support its bid to increase its influence over the LTTE. Mathaya also attempted to leverage his position as leader of the People's Front of Liberation Tigers – the LTTE political wing – to increase his own power base. He also attempted to recruit his own loyalists by contacting militants disillusioned by Velupillai Prabhakaran – notably those who had been punished for breaching one rule or the other in the movement's code of conduct.

Following Rajiv Gandhi assassination, RAW increased the pace of its infiltration operations, placing agents acting as business owners in LTTE-controlled areas while also recruiting fishermen and smugglers travelling from the Jaffna Peninsula to Tamil Nadu. The Indians also sent several Tamil infiltrators recruited in Tamil Nadu to volunteer in the LTTE. Similarly, genuine LTTE militants jailed in India were turned, and then set free in order to let them reintegrate into the movement, pretending to have escaped through their own efforts. Acting as moles, several of these agents were to assassinate the LTTE supremo when the time came, thus paving the way for Mathaya to take over as the movement's leader. Once this was achieved, the Tigers would had been totally under New Delhi's control.

However, the National Intelligence Wing's counterintelligence department detected that something amiss was in the air. In particular, one of the turned agents rallied LTTE-held areas through Colombo, arousing their suspicions and triggering a tightening of the security measures. The most serious blunder, however, was the interception of MV *Ahat* by the Indian Navy in January 1993. This had been possible only thanks to information leaked by no less than Mathaya to RAW, which in turned had forwarded the tip to the Indian Navy. However, LTTE SIGINT operators had intercepted radio communication between Mathaya and his RAW handlers, thereby virtually dooming him. In the meantime, Mathaya, already worried by his waning influence in the movement – notably because his attempts to create his own support base had let to accusations of mismanagement – threatened to initiate a public fast and starve himself to death. In the end, on 31 March 1993, he and several of his bodyguards were arrested in Manipay by a group led by Pottu Amman and Soosai.[10]

While the masterplan of RAW hijacking the LTTE unravelled with his arrest, it was from this position that the Indian operation damaged the movement the most. The arrest of Mathaya was only the beginning of more than a year of investigations. These gradually turned into a witch-hunt, where suspicion became the norm in the LTTE. The arrested Indian agents usually denounced as accomplices anyone but the real agents they knew of, in the hope that the latter would warn RAW and the Indians would rescue them. Nearly 1,000 militants were questioned at one point or another, including well-known and liked commanders such as Balraj or Theepan. Indeed, a number of innocent fighters were sometimes tortured before being released, which even happened to one of Velupillai Prabhakaran's own bodyguards. Around 600 militants were eventually assessed as being involved in the conspiracy to some degree or other, and 257 were executed. Mathaya himself was killed on 28 December 1994.

Most of the main culprits had their confessions video-recorded and the tapes were shown in all the movement's bases. Furthermore, realising the extent of RAW infiltration, the LTTE took drastic measures, mainly because it began to fear an Indian Special Forces raid targeting its leadership or crucial infrastructures. As a result, the movement leaders began to move from one safe house to another almost daily, while several bases were relocated. All radio codes and call signs were also changed.[11]

Hence, it is hardly surprising that the LTTE, busy dealing with the RAW infiltration, proved unable to launch new large-scale offensives after the Leap Frog operation. Instead, the Tigers limited themselves to small-scale assaults, with the most spectacular being a Black Tiger attack against Palali AB. On 2 August 1994, a squad of the Captain Miller unit was infiltrated and managed to reach the air base. However, the operation was a failure, with the whole team being killed, except for Kennedy, its commander, who was captured alive. Before its demise, the suicide squad nonetheless managed to destroy a single SLAF Bell-212.

Whilst still dominant in the north, the Tigers had lost a lot of ground in the east, where the cumulative effect of unspectacular – but incessant – Army and Special Task Force counterinsurgency operations had markedly diminished their influence. Indeed, in early March 1994, the government managed to organise local elections, and these were only marginally disturbed by the LTTE – which had withdrawn the bulk of its fighters to the safer north the previous year.[12]

## War weariness

However, the blow received at Pooneryn had also made the Sri Lankan Army command cautious. Indeed, only two brigade-sized operations took place in the north during the following months. On 22 April, they launched a sweep in the Mannar district, which was only a diversion for Operation Jayagama (Victory Path) that followed three days later in the Vavuniya district. Four battalions – the 8th SLLI, 2nd Sinha, 4th Gemunu Watch and 2nd Vijayaba – as well as the 2nd Commando Regiment, all under Brigadier Patrick Fernando, launched an advance and seized an area of roughly 75km$^2$, including several villages, until 14 May, when the operation ended. These troops met with only minimal enemy resistance, limited mainly to harassing mortar fire.[13]

Wider segments of the Sri Lankan population at large had also grown increasingly wary of the apparently never-ending war in the north and the east. Whilst D.B. Wijetunge, the successor of Ranasinghe Premadasa as President, kept the same stance as his predecessor, it became unavoidable that the pursuit of the war would sooner or later

become a major political theme. This happened during the campaign leading to the 1994 parliamentary elections, when Chandrika Kumaratunga, the daughter of former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became the figurehead of the People's Alliance – a coalition uniting the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and small left-wing parties – and campaigned under a peace programme advocating the end of the conflict through negotiation. The Alliance won 105 out of 225 seats in the parliament, with its arch-rival, the UNP, coming second with 94 seats. The Alliance then constructed a coalition government with smaller parties, headed by Chandrika Kumaratunga as Prime Minister.

Before long, the new Prime Minister initiated contacts with the LTTE and relaxed the embargo targeting insurgent-held areas. The Tigers soon answered favourably to these openings by releasing 10 captured police officers on 2 September. The LTTE saw Kumaratunga as a weak leader and believed that concessions could be easily squeezed out of her. In the meantime, the LTTE launched several spectacular operations, such as the attack against SLNS *Sagarawardene*, to keep the new government under pressure. However, this triggered an SLA response with Operation Jayahanda on 25 September, under which the 3rd Gajaba and 5th Gemunu Watch, supported by two T-55 squadrons, sallied from the Palali complex. Over five hours they advanced 4km, seizing dozens of LTTE bunkers whilst meeting with only feeble resistance. The two battalions lost only one KIA and 20 wounded.[14]

All of this was taking place during a new electoral contest, this time for the Presidency, and before long it appeared that the LTTE was engaging itself in an exercise of king-making – albeit in a particularly bloody fashion. On 24 October 1994, a female Black Tiger infiltrated a political meeting and detonated her suicide belt, killing 50 people, including her main target, Gamini Dissanayake, the UNP candidate for the Presidency and main rival of Kumaratunga. In the end, Kumaratunga gained 62 percent of the votes and was sworn in as President on 12 November. Talks between the LTTE and the government, facilitated by an international committee including diplomats from Norway, the Netherlands and Canada, continued while both sides continued to refrain from engaging each other militarily. On 8 January 1995, a formal ceasefire came into place, with both sides agreeing to keep a 600-metre gap between their positions, thus bringing to an end the so-called Eelam War II.[15]

# Bibliography


Albrecht, Gerhard, *Weyers Flotten Taschenbusch 1994/1996: Warships of the World* (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe Vorlag, 1994).

Amnesty International (AI), 'Sri Lanka, Summary of human rights concern during 1990' (1 February 1991).

AI, 'Sri Lanka: The Northeast: Human rights violations in a context of armed conflict' (31 August 1991).

AI, 'Sri Lanka: Deliberate killings of Muslim and Tamil villagers in Polonnaruwa' (31 May 1992).

AI, 'Sri Lanka: Summary of human rights concerns' (1 February 1994).

Ariaratnam, Kagusthan, *A Typical Terrorist Cell; The Tiger Organization Security Intelligence Service* (2003).

Balasingham, Adele Ann, *The Will to Freedom: An Inside View of Tamil Resistance* (Mitcham, Surrey: Fairmax Publishing Ltd, 2003).

Balasingham, Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (1993, online version at tamilnation.co).

Balasingham, Anton, *War and Peace: Armed Struggle and Peace Efforts of Liberation Tigers* (Mitcham: Fairmax Publishing, 2004).

Balasuriya, Mahinda, *The Rise and Fall of the LTTE* (Colombo: Asian Network on Conflict Research, 2011).

Boyagoda, Ajith, *A Long Watch: War, Captivity and Return to Sri Lanka* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016).

Chandraprema, C.A., *Gota's War: The Crushing of Tamil Tiger Terrorism in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Ranjan Wijeratne Foundation, 2012).

Colombage, J.S.K., *Asymmetric Warfare at Sea; The Case of Sri Lanka* (thesis, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, 2015).

De Soyza, Niromi, *Tamil Tigress: My Story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka's bloody civil war* (Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

Dissanayake, T.D.S.A., *War or Peace in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Popular Prakashan, 2005).

Fontanellaz, Adrien, 'Evolutions organisationnelles et tactiques du LTTE; un exemple d'hybridation', *DSI*, No. 126 (November–December 2016).

Fontanellaz, Adrien, *The LTTE's Black Tigers, a military perspective* (unpublished article, 2016).

Fontanellaz, Adrien, 'Les Tigres des Mers du LTTE', *LOS*, No. 37 (March–April 2017).

Fontanellaz, Adrien, *Paradise Afire Vol. 2; The Sri Lankan War, 1987–1990* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019).

Fontanellaz, Adrien & Cooper, Tom, *Paradise Afire Vol. 1; the Sri Lankan War, 1971–1987* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2018).

Gunaratne, Kamal, *Road to Nandikadal: True Story of defeating Tamil Tigers* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2016).

Gunaratne, Merril, *Cop in the Crossfire* (Colombo: Merril Gunaratne, 2011).

Gunaratna, Rohan, *War and Peace in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1987).

Gunaratne, Rohan, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies* (Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1994).

Gunaratne, Rohan, *International & Regional Security Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency* (Colombo: Alumni Association of the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies Sri Lanka, 1997).

Hashim, A.S., *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Herath, Tamara, *Women in Terrorism; Case of the LTTE* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2012).

Hole, Rajan *et al.*, *Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka, an Inside Account* (online version via http://www.uthr.org).

Human Rights Watch (HRW), *World Report 1992*.

Human Rights Watch, 'Sri Lanka, Stop Killing Civilians', *Human Rights Watch* Vol. 7 No. 11 (July 1995).

*Jain Commission Interim Report* (August 1997, via tamilnation.co).

Malaravan, *War Journey: Diary of a Tamil Tiger* (London: Penguin Books, 2013)

Marks, Thomas A., *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007).

Mendis, L.M.H, *Assignment Peace in the Name of the Motherland* (Nugegoda: author publication, 2009).

Ministry of Defence, *Humanitarian Operation Factual Analysis; July 2006–May 2009* (Colombo: Ministry of Defence, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2011).

Moore, John E., *Jane's Fighting Ships 1987–88* (Coulsdon, Surrey: Jane's Information Group, 1987).

Munasinghe, Sarath, *A soldier's version: An account of the on-going Conflict and the Origin of Terrorism in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Major General Sarath Munasinghe, 2000).

Murari, S., *The Pirabhakaran Saga: The Rise and fall of an Eelam Warrior* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2016).

Narayan Swamy, M.R., *Tigers of Lanka: from Boys to Guerrillas* (Delhi: Vijitha Yapa, 1996).

Narayan Swamy, M.R, *Inside an Elusive Mind: Pirabhakaran* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2003).

Narayan Swamy, M.R, *The Tiger Vanquished: LTTE's Story* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2010).

O'Ballance, Edgar, *Cyanide War: The Tamil Insurrection in Sri Lanka 1973–88* (London: Brassey's, 1989).

Ostrovsky, Victor & Hoy, Claire, *By Way of Deception; The Making and Unmaking of a Mossad Officer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

Parshall, Jonathan & Tully, Anthony, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005).

Pratap, Anita, *Island of Blood: Frontline reports from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and other South Asian Flashpoints* (New Delhi: Viking, 2001).

Povlock, Paul A., *A Guerilla War at Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War* (McLean, Virginia: Small War Foundation, 2011).

Ranatunga, Cyril, *Adventurous Journey from Peace to War: Insurgency to Terrorism* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2009)

Richards, Joanne, *An Institutional History of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)*, CCDP Working Paper 10 (Geneva: The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2014).

Salter, Mark, *To End a Civil War: Norway's peace engagement in Sri Lanka* (London: Hurst & Co, 2015).

Sharpe, Richard, *Jane's Fighting Ships 1993–94* (Coulsdon, Surrey: Jane's Information Group, 1993).

Subramanian, Nirupama, *Sri Lanka: Voices from a War Zone* (New Delhi: Viking, 2005).

Wickremesekera, Channa, *The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka* (Routledge India, 2016).

# Notes

## Introduction

1 The bulk of EROS militants, including Velupillai Balakumar, opted to join the LTTE. However, others refused and managed to keep EROS alive for a while longer: unsurprisingly, the movement was fiercely opposed by the LTTE.
2 A change of the Constitution requested a two-third parliamentary majority.
3 Swamy (2003), p.213.
4 See Volume 2 for further details about this attack. The rest of this sub-chapter is based on Wickremesekera (2016), pp.69–70; Swamy (2003), pp.213–17; Balasingham (2001), pp.253–57; and Munasinghe, p.98.
5 Balasingham (2001), pp.259–60; Munasinghe, p.100; Chandraprema (2012), p.185; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.445; and Pratap, pp.90, 94–95.
6 Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.443–47.
7 Munsasinghe (p.102) reports that the Tigers seized 293 T-56, T-84S, SLR and SAR 80 assault rifles, as well as 65 SMGs, 28 LMGs and 78 .303 Lee Enfield rifles in the Batticaloa police station alone. In total, the LTTE captured the police stations of Batticaloa, Kalkudah, Kalmunai, Valachchenai, Samanthurei, Pottuvil and Akkaraipattu; see Chandraprema (2012), pp.185–86.
8 The biggest of these mass graves was in Tirukkovil, where 200 bodies were subsequently retrieved. Munasinghe, pp.101–02; Chandraprema (2012), pp.185–86; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.446; Gunaratne, pp.156, 158, 160.
9 Mendis (2009), pp.132–34; Munasinghe, p.103; Chandraprema (2012), pp.185–87; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.446; Gunaratne, pp.158–60).
10 Chandraprema (2012) pp.185–86; Munasinghe, p.103.
11 Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.448, 453; Munasinghe, p.104; Mendis (2009), pp.135–42; Gunaratne, p.167; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Eelam War II: LTTE takes upper hand at the onset', 22 February 2013 (extracted 10 May 2019).
12 Salter, p.21.
13 No less than Anton Balasingham – the LTTE chief diplomat – explained precisely this to Norwegian diplomat Solheim much later on, in 2000; see Salter, p.56.
14 Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019.
15 Salter, p.22; AI, 'Sri Lanka, Summary of human rights concern during 1990'.
16 Munasinghe, pp.136–38; HRW, 'World Report 1992' & 'Sri Lanka, Stop Killings of Civilians'; AI, 'Sri Lanka, Summary of human rights concern during 1990', 'Sri Lanka: Summary of human rights concerns during 1990' & 'Sri Lanka: Deliberate killings of Muslim and Tamil villagers in Polonnaruwa'.
17 Gunaratne, p.337; AI, 31 August 1991; HRW, *World Report 1992*. Indian journalist Nirupama Subramanian gives a telling, but subsequent example of how these Tamil anti-LTTE groups worked. Muthulingam Ganesh Kumar (alias Razeek) was a former EPRLF militant who, by 1996, had created his own formation with 150 fighters, the 'Razeek group'. These were trained, armed and paid for by the Army, and acted as the latter's eyes and ears in the Batticaloa district. See Subramanian, pp.117–30.
18 Boyagoda, pp.45, 46; HRW, *World Report 1992*; AI, 'Sri Lanka, Stop Killings of Civilians' & 'Sri Lanka, Summary of Human Rights Concerns'.
19 AI, 'Sri Lanka: The Northeast: Human Rights Violations in a Context of Armed Conflict' & 'Sri Lanka, Summary of human rights concerns'.

## Chapter 1

1 Including the 5th (V) Artillery Regiment, which was an infantry unit despite its name.
2 Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.411, 902 (as well as various corps and unit-websites at www.army.lk) and Shamindra Ferdinando, 'SLA suffers for want of cohesive planning', 4 July 2013.
3 Sri Lanka Army, pp.411, 493–97, 904–05; unit-websites at www.army.lk; interview with veteran of the Sri Lanka Artillery Corps, provided on condition of anonymity, May 2017. The acquisition of the 12 Type 59-I guns in 1991 is mentioned in Wickremesekera (2016) p.88, and the relevant panels in the Orr's Hill Army Museum.
4 The 2nd (Volunteer) Armoured Regiment never had armoured vehicles on its own and was dissolved in 1989.
5 Senaratne (2015); Mudannayake, pp.2–3.
6 These tanks had been produced under Soviet licence there for decades, and the Czech-produced T-55s were widely considered as better-manufactured than their Soviet or Polish-produced brethren.
7 Senaratne (2015), pp.134–39; Mudannayake pp.2–3, 5–8, 10–12, 18, 20, 23–32.
8 Wickremesekera (2016), p.89; Senaratne (2015), pp.29, 60, 62, 66, 85; and various pages of the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps website (https://alt.army.lk/slac).
9 Munasinghe, p.109. See Volume 2 of this mini-series for further details about the second JVP insurrection.
10 Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.503.
11 Chandraprema (2012), pp.206–08; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.483.
12 Gunaratne, pp.255–56.
13 Gunaratne, p.287; Blodgett, pp.114,119; Subramanian, pp.67–68.
14 Interview with SLN officer, provided on condition of anonymity, May 2017.
15 Gunaratne, pp.287, 303–04; Chandraprema (2012), p.204.
16 Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.486.
17 Blodgett, p.114; Gunaratne, p.287; Wickremesekera (2016), p.87. It is, however, striking that it is precisely this overall strategy that was implemented during Eelam War IV, between 2006 and 2009.
18 Interview with Ariaratnam, April 2019; Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa was, for instance, renowned for being a very aggressive military commander. More generally, it must be emphasised that the SLA never ceased to launch offensives – even in the aftermath of its most severe defeats.
19 By the end of 1989, these numbers included almost 2,000 volunteers, but these were converted into regular servicemen during Eelam War II. Senaratne (1998), pp.92, 98, 104–05, 116, 140, 152, 168, 170.
20 Senaratne (1998), pp.140, 153; Pereira, p.89.
21 Number of available aircraft as per Senaratne (1998), p.116.
22 Chandraprema (2012), p.197; Mendis (2014), pp.68, 75–76; Senaratne (1998), pp.118, 120; Pereira, p.101.
23 Mendis (2014), p.71.
24 Chandraprema (2012), p.197; Mendis (2014), pp.71–76.
25 Senaratne (1998), p.141; Mendis (2014), p.27; Ratmalana Air Force Museum.
26 Senaratne (1998), p.153; Pereira, pp.102, 104; Mendis (2014), pp.27, 154, 156, 178, 180.
27 Senaratne (1998), pp.140, 168; Pereira, pp.103, 107–08

## Chapter 2

1 This is excluding the so-called 'Indian Tamils', which the LTTE never attempted to recruit, and the Muslims of Sri Lanka, who are in the immense majority Tamils too. In the latter case, the LTTE, which had recruited among them in the 1980s, had finally turned against the Muslim community from 1990 onwards. Otherwise, these numbers are only for orientation purpose. There was no census between 1981 and the end of the war in 2008. Related from the 'Table 2.10 Population by ethnic group and census years' and the 'Census of Population and Housing of Sri Lanka, 2012' at www.statistics.gov.lk.
2 Narayan Swarmy (2003), p.234.
3 Pradap, p.95.
4 Richards, p.17.
5 HRW, 'Living in Fear'; Richards, p.31; Herath, p.106; Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019.
6 Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019. Losses are as communicated by the LTTE's Political Committee (www.eelamweb.com/maveerar/statistics).

7 Richards, p.31; Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019.
8 Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
9 According to Ariaratnam (interview, April 2019), this was so because of numerous rapes committed by Indian Army soldiers.
10 Adele Balasingham (1993), and (2001), p.269.
11 Fighters from subsequent units had dog tags that began with the number of the region to which they were attached (interview with former LTTE militant, provided on condition of anonymity, 2018).
12 Richards, p.19; Ariaratnam, interview April 2019; Dharmeratnam Sivaram, 'War is far from over – What is behind LTTE's recent recruitment drive?', *Tamil Nation*, 18 November 1998.
13 Tamilnet, 'Book on LTTE's first conventional formation launched', 1 October 2003.
14 The LTTE's military terminology was inconsequent. Notably, as several Padai Ani units expanded in size, their English designations changed from regiments to brigades. Meanwhile, the movement began using the designation 'division', in its literal sense of a 'sub-unit of a larger whole'. Therefore, in the LTTE's English-language publications, a 'division' could mean a rather small formation. For example: in 1992, the Imran Pandian Padai Ani included the Richard, Maiuran and Kuddy Groups, which were all companies by their complement and armament.
15 Richards, p.20; A. Fontanellaz (2016); Tamilnet, 'Charles Anthony Brigade celebrates 15th anniversary of inauguration', 11 April 2016, 'Book on LTTE's first conventional formation launched', 1 October 2003, and 'Pirapaharan extols Jeyanthan Brigade on 12th Anniversary', 5 May 2005. However, the Charles Anthony unit could had been activated in 1990, and other sources specified that they had between 600 and at most 1,000 fighters during Eelam War II (Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019).
16 Ariaratnam, interivew, April 2019; Rohan Gunaratne (1997), p.91; Malarevan, pp.103, 106–08; Boyagoda, p.44; Gunaratne, p.183.
17 Ariaratnam, interview, August 2019.
18 Shamindra Fernando, 'Tigers benefits from IPKF experience', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 10 April 2013.
19 Ariaratnam, interviews, April & May 2019; Rohan Gunaratne (1997), p.87; A. Fontanellaz (2016).
20 Colombage, p.174.
21 Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
22 Narayan Swarmy (2003), pp.249–50.
23 Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019; Fontanellaz (2016).

## Chapter 3

1 Gunaratne, pp.167–68; Mendis (2009), p.143.
2 Gunaratne, p.171.
3 Gunaratne, pp.169–71; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.450; Mendis (2009), p.151; Chandraprema (2012), pp.186, 188; D.B.S. Jeyaraj, 'Brigadier Balraj: Legendary commander of the LTTE', dbsjeyaraj.com, 22 May 2011.
4 Anne Balasingham (1993).
5 Malaravan, p.38.
6 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Shocking politico-military miscalculations', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 26 February 2013.
7 Sergeant Major K. Chandrasena & Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Gajaba, Gemunu troops in daring heli-borne rescue mission', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 14 May 2013.
8 Gunaratne, pp.172, 174; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.449–51; Mendis (2009), pp.151–54.
9 Adele Balasingham (2003), pp.265–66; Senaratne (1998), p.109; Chandraprema (2012) pp.188–89; Gunaratne, pp.181–84, 201.
10 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Flying into the jaws of Tigers (part II)', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 8 August 2013.
11 *Ibid*.
12 Senaratne (1998), pp.109–14; Gunaratne, pp.184–85; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.454–55; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Flying into the jaws of Tigers (part II)', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 8 August 2013.
13 Adele Balasingham (1993); Mendis (2009), p.156; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.455; Chandraprema (2012) p.189.
14 Literally 'three forces' in Sinhalese, because of its combined nature involving SLA, SLN and SLAF. Senaratne (2015), p.124.
15 Senaratne (2015), p.125; Chandraprema (2012), p.189; Gunaratne, p.186; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.456–57; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Mandaitivu build-up', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 18 July 2013.
16 Chandraprema (2012), pp.189–91; Gunaratne, pp.186–88; Mendis (2009), pp.158–59, 167.
17 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Role of the navy: Landing operations', *The Island*, 22 March 2013.
18 *Ibid*.; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.451, 453; Mendis (2009), pp.156, 161; Munasinghe, pp.110–12.
19 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'More on Thrivida Balaya', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 8 July 2013.
20 C.A. Chandraprema (2012), p.192; Munasinghe, p.111; Gunaratne, pp.189–91; Shamindra Fernandino, 'Suicide Express', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 16 July 2013.
21 According to the official SLA casualty list – see Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.701–02. C.A. Chandraprema (2012), p.192, mentions 90 KIA in only one of the two battalions engaged in Jaffna town.
22 C.A. Chandraprema (2012), p.192; Gunaratne, pp.192–201; Mendis (2009), pp.163–66; Senaratne (1998), p.108; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.701–02.
23 Munasinghe, p.111; Mendis (2009), pp.168–72, Adele Balasingham (1993).
24 Mendis (2009), pp.173–76.
25 Gunaratne, pp.175–78, 217–19, 228; Adele Balasingham (1993); Malaravan, p.32.
26 Malaravan, pp.7–8.
27 Malaravan, p.75.
28 Malaravan, pp.7, 41–43, 75; Gunaratne, pp.200–22.
29 Malaravan, p.77; Adele Balasingham (1993); Gunaratne, pp.223–26, 229, 246; D.B.S. Jeyaraj, '"Brigadier" Balraj: Legendary commander of the LTTE', dbsjeyaraj.com, 22 May 2011 (extracted 9 June 2019).
30 Malaravan, pp.80–81; Gunaratne, pp.228–30; Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Vignettes on Three Black Tigers Heroes in the Battlefield', tamilnation.org, 17 August 2004; D.B.S. Jeyaraj, '"Brigadier" Balraj: Legendary commander of the LTTE', dbsjeyaraj.com, 22 May 2011. Characteristically, while Gunaratne, p.229, who led the breakthrough, emphasised that all the troops had left by 1845 hours, the LTTE insisted that it continued facing 'limited fire' from the camp until overrunning it.
31 Channa Wickremesekera (2016), p.73; Gunaratne, pp.233–46; Mendis (2009), p.178.

## Chapter 4

1 This ambush took place under circumstances described in Chapter II. The feat was repeated on 16 March, when another patrol lost one KIA and eight WIA outside Silwathura. Munasinghe, p.112; Gunaratne, pp.255–57; Mendis (2009), pp.183, 185; Adele Balasingham (1993); Shamindra Ferdinando, 'A Ding-Dong Battle', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 24 March 2013.
2 Gunaratne, pp.259–62; Mendis (2009), p.182; Adele Balasingham (1993); Senaratne (1998), p.132.
3 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'A Ding-Dong Battle', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 24 March 2013. Baba is a nickname given to the Pasilan by the Sri Lankan Army troops.
4 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'A Ding-Dong Battle', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 24 March 2013; Gunaratne, pp.263–64, 266–67.
5 Gunaratne, pp.265–75; Mendis (2009), p.185.
6 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'A Ding-Dong Battle', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 24 March 2013.
7 Gunaratne, pp.269–76; Mendis (2009), pp.186–89.
8 Wickremesekera (2016), p.195; Munasinghe, p.112.
9 Mendis (2009), pp.191–97; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.711–12; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'A Ding-Dong Battle', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 24 March 2013.
10 Bayagoda, p.44.
11 Mendis (2009), pp.198–202; Munasinghe, p.112; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.711–12; Boyagoda, pp.43–44.
12 Mendis (2009), pp.203–07; Wickremesekera (2016), pp.89–90; Chandraprema (2012), p.195; Munasinghe, p.113.
13 Munasinghe, p.144; Mendis (2009), pp.201–14.

14 K. Gunaratne, pp.284–87; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.464; Chandraprema (2012), p.198; Senaratne (2015), p.126; Munasinghe, p.114; Fontanellaz (2017).
15 Velupillai Prabhakaran himself declared that the 1991 Elephant Pass battle was the LTTE's 'Mother of all Battles', Munasinghe, p.115.
16 Some sources mention that the bulldozers were also filled with explosives, and thus were VBIED of sorts, but this is contradictory with other testimonies, mentioning the militants following closely behind these once they advanced toward the Army positions – which would not have occurred if the main purpose of the vehicles was to detonate their embedded charges on enemy positions. Gunaratne, p.288; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.465; Senaratne (2015), p.127; Pratap, pp.91–92; Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
17 Adele Balasingham (1993).
18 Gunaratne, pp.288–91; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.464–65; Munasinghe, p.114; Fontanellaz (2017).
19 Mendis (2009), pp.225, 230, 232; Munasinghe, p.120.
20 Gunaratne, p.291; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.464–67; Senaratne (2015), pp.130–31; Fontanellaz (2017).
21 Gunaratne, p.292; Senaratne (2015), p.128; Chandraprema, p.199; Munasinghe, p.115; Adele Balasingham (1993).
22 Chandraprema (2012), p.199; Senaratne (2015), p.129; Kamal Gunartane, p.292; Adele Balasingham (1993); Munasinghe, p.115; Fontanellaz (2017).
23 Adele Balasingham (1993).
24 Seranatne (2015), pp.129–30; Gunaratne, pp.292–93; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.468; Munasinghe, p.115; Adele Balsingham (1993); Mendis (2009), p.244; Fontanellaz (2017).
25 LTTE losses are those communicated by its own Political Bureau, SLA losses are from Munasinghe, p.117.
26 Pratap, p.94.
27 Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019; Pratap, p.91; Chandraprema (2012), p.200; Adele Balsasingham (1993).

## Chapter 5

1 Ariaratnam, interviews, April & June 2019; Adele Balasingham (1993); Channa Wickremesekera (2016), p.91. The name 'One Four' came from an LTTE motto during the struggle against the IPKF: 'One of our own against four Indian soldiers.'
2 Senaratne (1998), p.136; Mendis (2009), pp.247, 255.
3 Ariaratnam, interview, April 2019. LTTE's losses as mentioned in Adele Balasingham (1993), those of the SLA as Wickremesekera (2016), p.91. Other details from Mendis (2009), pp.247–55; Munasinghe, p.120; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Hullaballoo over Waidyaratne taking over command', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 11 May 2013.
4 Senaratne (1998), p.136; Munasinghe, p.120.
5 Senaratne (1998), p.136; Munasinghe, p.120; Wickremesekera (2016), pp.91–92; Mendis (2009), pp.257–63.
6 Munasinghe, pp.121–22; Chandraprema (2012), pp.203–05; Gunaratne, pp.296–97; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Hullaballoo over Waidyaratne taking over command', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 11 May 2013.
7 Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019; Chandraprema (2012), p.205; Mendis (2009), pp.264–65; Gunaratne, p.297.
8 Gunaratne, p.297.
9 Gunaratne, pp.297–98.
10 Chandraprema (2012) mentions 42 KIA and 154 WIA during the operation. Mendis (2009), p.265; Gunaratne, p.299.
11 Chandraprema (2012), p.206.
12 Wickremesekera (2016), p.92; Senaratne (2015), p.140; Mendis (2009), pp.269–73.
13 Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.490; Wickremesekera (2016), p.90; Senaratne (2015), pp.139–40; Mendis (2009), pp.268–74.
14 Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.490; Senaratna (2015), pp.140–41; Wickremesekera (2016), p.93; Mendis (2009), pp.275, 279–80.
15 '26 years of Remembrance, 1st Harbin Y-8 Plane Crash – 05th Jul' 1992', AeroInfographics, 4 July 2018; Senaratne (1998), p.140.
16 Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
17 Wickremesekera (2016), p.93; Munasinghe, p.124; Mendis, pp.281–82.
18 Sunil Keppetipola, 'General Denzil L. Kobbekaduwa – a Hero and genuine Leader', Daily News, 7 August 2012; Senaratne (2015), p.126. For Yamamoto's influence over the Imperial Japanese Navy strategic decision-making, see Parshall & Tully, pp.36–37.
19 Gunaratne, p.311.
20 Munasinghe, p.124.
21 Gunaratne, p.312. The two officers were posthumously promoted to the ranks of lieutenant general and major general respectively.
22 Wickremesekera (2016), p.93; Mendis (2009), pp.282–85.
23 Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.746–47; Munasinghe, p.125.
24 Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.746–47; Munasinghe, p.125; Chandraprema (2012), pp.209–10; Adele Balasingham (1993); Wickremesekera (2016), p.103.
25 Adele Balasingham (1993).
26 Adele Balasingham (1993); Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.748–51; Munasinghe, p.127.

## Chapter 6

1 Boyagoda, p.55.
2 Fontanellaz & Ali (2018); Goldrick, pp.176, 187–88; Blodgett, pp.103, 126–31; Albrecht, pp.274–77; Sharpe, p.608; Moore, p.470.
3 Boyagoda, pp.55–56.
4 Colombage, pp.137, 138, 148, 153, 157, 160–62; Blodgett, pp.130–31; Goldrick, p.187; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Role of the Navy: Landing operations', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 22 March 2013.
5 Colombage, p.139.
6 Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Chandraprema (2012), pp.200–01; Colombage, pp.67, 163, 170.
7 Colombage, pp.168-168.
8 Those committed suicide attacks a few days thereafter, triggering a chain of events which sparked an open conflict between the IPKF and the LTTE, as detailed in Volume 2. Colombage, pp.68–69, 163, 169; Sakhuja, pp.2–6; Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Navy's role in triumph over LTTE – SLN 60th Anniversary on Dec. 9', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 7 December 2010.
9 Mendis (2009), p.179; Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Chandraprema (2012), pp.200–01; Wickremesekera, p.103.
10 Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Homage to the Black Tigers: A Review of Sooriya Puthalvargal 2003 Memorial Souvenir', tamilnation.org, 22 June 2004; Wickremesekera, p.103; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Sea Tigers open new Front, with Suicide Attacks at Sea', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 27 March 2013; Sri Lanka Navy Museum. There are discrepancies about the date the first Sea Black Tigers attack took place, with some sources mentioning 10 July and others 16 July 1991.
11 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Sea Tigers open new Front, with Suicide Attacks at Sea, slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 27 March 2013.
12 For example, '85 fishermen killed in 10 Years: Govt', *Times of India*, 18 August 2012. Surprisingly, this first failed attack boosted the Sea Tigers' prestige, and the number of volunteers willing to join them increased dramatically.
13 Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Sea Tigers open new front, with Suicide Attacks at Sea', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 27 March 2013, & 'An unparalleled daring feat', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 31 March 2013; Chandraprema (2012), pp.200–01; Colombage, p.74, Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Homage to the Black Tigers: A Review of Sooriya Puthalvargal 2003 Memorial Souvenir', tamilnation.org, 22 June 2004. It must be emphasised that another, completely different version, of the 4 May 1991 attack mentions that the suicide craft deliberately acted in a suspicious way to look like a smuggling boat and was thus allowed to close on SLNS *Abeetha* to be searched, and it is only then that the two Sea Black Tigers triggered the explosive charge hidden in their boat. See Chandraprema, pp.200–01.
14 Nilavan, Mathan, Puhalarasan and Maniarasan were aliases of Kanthasamy Ramachandran, Seenivasagam Sivakumar, Subramaniam Nagatheepan and Vethanayagam Rajaruban respectively. Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Homage to the Black Tigers: A Review

of Sooriya Puthalvargal 2003 Memorial Souvenir', tamilnation.org, 22 June 2004.
15 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1, H-2; Ariaratnam, interview, July 2019; Mendis (2009), p.303. Interestingly, the latter, using pro-LTTE newspapers of the time, mentions a swarm attack, with several combat speedboats attacking the Dvora, covering a suicide-boat which eventually rammed the SLN's FAC.
16 Sakhuja, p.3; Wickremesekera, p.103; Mendis (2009), pp.294–95; Nirupama Subramanian, 'Rajiv Gandhi Assassination Probe: Court ruling on MV Ahat Crew comes as a setback to SIT', *India Today*, 31 July 1996.
17 Colombage, pp.64, 142, 170; Wickremesekera (2016), pp.101–03; Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
18 Povlock, p.12.
19 Colombage, p.171.
20 Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Fontanellaz, 'Les Tigres des Mers du LTTE'; Colombage, pp.171, 176, 192.
21 Wickremesekera (2016), p.102; Ariaratnam, interview, May 2019.
22 Chandraprema (2012), p.213; Wickremesekera (2016), p.103; Mendis (2009), pp.257–58, 299; Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1, H-2; Ariaratnam, interview, June 2019.
23 Mendis (2009), p.267; Ariaratnam, interview, June 2019.
24 DECIMA MAS was the Italian Royal Navy combat diver unit during the Second World War.
25 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1, H-4; Colombage, p.173; Ariaratnam, interviews, May and June 2019.
26 Ariaratnam, interviews, May, June & July 2019; Wickremesekera, pp.6, 104; Mendis (2009), pp.263, 285; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Siege on Jaffna and assassination of a Navy Chief', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 25 September 2012.
27 Mendis (2009), pp.286–89; Wickremesekera (2016), p.105; NESOHR (2007), p.71; Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019.
28 Wolf pack: the *modus operandi* of German submarines operating in the Atlantic during the Second World War.
29 Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Sri Lanka MoD, H-1, H-2; Wickremesekera (2016), pp.101, 105; Mendis (2009), pp.290, 298–99; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Siege on Jaffna and assassination of a Navy Chief', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 25 September 2012.
30 Admiral Ravindra C WijeGunaratne, 'He will be my Flag Lieutenant until I retire', *The Sunday Times*, 14 October 2018.
31 The four Sea Black Tigers involved in the operation were Pathmavathy Arumugam, Puvanesvary Kanapathipillai, Kandasamy Ravinayagam and Kugathasan Pranavan; see Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Homage to the Black Tigers: A Review of Sooriya Puthalvarga 2003 Memorial Souvenir', tamilnation.org, 22 June 2004.
32 Boyagoda, pp.60–62.
33 Boyagoda, pp.57–59, 70–77; Ariaratnam, interviews, May & June 2019; Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1, H-2. The latter source mentions one KIA, seven WIA and 20 MIA.
34 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1, H-2.

## Chapter 7

1 Munasinghe, p.128; Chandraprema (2012), pp.213–14; Sri Lanka Army (1999), p.754; Gunaratne, p.324.
2 Senaratne (2015), p.141; Mendis (2009), pp.308, 314; Ariaratnam, interview, August 2019.
3 Munasinghe, pp.129–31.
4 The movement cadres were frequently watching war movies to find inspiration for new tactics (Ariaratnam, interview, August 2019). However, sources closer to the SLA report that the two tanks were bogged-down and destroyed by engineers; see Senaratne (2015), pp.141–42.
5 Ariaratnam, interviews, July & August 2019; Munasinghe, pp.127–31; Sri Lanka Army (1999), pp.755–58; Wickremesekera (2016), pp.106–07; Senaratne (2015), pp.141–42; Mendis (2009), pp.306–13; Senaratne (1998), p.156.
6 Ariaratnam, interview, August 2019; Gunaratne, pp.326–27; Chandraprema (2012), p.216.
7 The total strength of the garrison varied depending on the author, from roughly 1,500 to as many as 2,500 soldiers and sailors. Gunaratne, pp.326–27; Munasinghe, p.132; Chandraprema (2012), p.214; Mendis (2009), p.315; Senaratne (2015), p.143.
8 Ariaratnam, interviews, May–August 2019; 'Pirapaharan extols Jeyanthan Brigade on 12th Anniversary', *Tamilnet*, 5 May 2005.
9 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), H-1; Ariaratnam, interviews, June–August 2019; Gunaratne, pp.328–30; Chandraprema (2012), pp.214–15; Mendis (2009), p.315. There is some doubt about the chronology of these events, as sources differ. For instance, the capture of mortars might have taken place during the following evening, when the LTTE tried to overrun the 1st SLLI's defensive perimeter. Interestingly, the LTTE published a list of 14 Black Tigers killed on 11 November – with four of them at most being the crew of the two suicide boats, although the Sea Black Tigers lists mention only two of them killed that night – one for each boat. See Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Homage to the Black Tigers: A Review of Sooriya Puthalvargal 2003 Memorial Souvenir', tamilnation.org.
10 Senaratne (1998), pp.159–60; Senaratne (2015), p.144; Chandraprema (2012), p.215; Mendis (2009), pp.316–19; Wickremesekera, p.201.
11 Admiral Ravindra C WijeGunaratne, 'He will be my Flag Lieutenant until I retire', *The Sunday Times*, 14 October 2018.
12 Gunaratne, p.330; Senaratne (1998), pp.159–62; Mendis (2009), pp.319–23.
13 Gunaratne, p.331; Chandraprema, p.217; Mendis (2009), p.326; Senaratne (2015), p.144; Munasinghe, p.134.
14 'Pirapaharan extols Jeyanthan Brigade on 12th anniversary', *Tamilnet*, 5 May 2005.
15 Senaratne (1998), pp.159–60.

## Chapter 8

1 Unless stated otherwise, this is based on interviews with Ariaratnam, May–August 2019, and Ariaratnam's paper 'A Typical Terrorist Cell' (2003).
2 D.B.S. Jeyaraj, 'Pottu Amman and the Intelligence Division of the LTTE', dbsjeyaraj.com, 11 September 2009.
3 Ostrovsky & Hoy, pp.127–30. Ostrovsky – a MOSSAD defector – does not mention specifically the LTTE, but Tamil insurgents. Once this became known to the public in 1990, the Sri Lankan government reacted by freezing further procurement of Israeli weapons, until 1995, when these resumed, notably with the acquisition of Israeli Aircraft Industries Kfir C.2 fighter-bombers and new batches of Super Dvora FACs; Shamindra Ferdinando, 'Could GoSL have afforded to lose Israeli help?', slwaronterror.blogspot.com, 20 August 2013.
4 D.B.S. Jeyaraj, 'Pottu Amman and the Intelligence Division of the LTTE', dbsjeyaraj.com, 11 September 2009.
5 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), pp.89, 117.
6 Kamal Gunaratne, pp.320, 322.
7 Sri Lanka MoD (2011), p.100; Narayan Swarmy (2003), pp.239–40.
8 See Vol. 1 and 2 for further details.
9 Neena Gopal, p.146. However, the exact time Mathaya was turned over by RAW is not easy to ascertain as the latter had numerous contacts with the Indians well before, notably during the two months that preceded the all-out war against the IPKF.
10 Adele Balasingham, pp.296–97; Narayan Swarmy (2003), pp.243–48; Neena Gopal, pp.146–50, 159–67.
11 Adele Balasingham (2003), p.298; Neena Gopal, p.167; Narayan Swarmy (2003), p.248.
12 Mendis (2009), p.326.
13 Mendis (2009), pp.327–30.
14 *Ibid*.
15 Ariaratnam, interview, August 2019; Mendis (2009), pp.327–30; Salter, pp.23–24; Narayan Swarmy (2003), pp.250–53; Anton Balasingham (2004), pp.197–207, 224–25, 254.

# About the author

Adrien Fontanellaz, from Switzerland, is a military history researcher and author. He is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Pully-based *Centre d'histoire et de prospective militaries* (Military History and Prospective Centre), and regularly contributes to the *Revue Militaire Suisse* and *Défence et Sécurity Internationale* magazines. This is his 10th title for Helion's '@War' series.